

# “Holding History, But Which History”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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“When we read the history books given to children in the United States, it all starts with heroic adventure—there is no bloodshed—and Columbus Day is a celebration.” This first line of the reading by Howard Zinn that Jan shared with us is an indictment of the early education system in this nation. Zinn’s statement is an indictment relating to the history that is generally taught about the earliest days of the colonization of this nation by Europeans. The book this line comes from, *A People’s History of the United States: 1492 - Present*, was first published in 1980, 41 years ago. And the book by Samuel Eliot Morison that Zinn cites to validate his indictment was written in 1954. The Morison book is now 67 years old, just two years younger than I am.

Recognizing the age of these two books, it would be reasonable and appropriate to question whether Zinn’s indictment is applicable to the educational system of today. Much has changed in the past 41 years. And even more has changed in the 67 years since Morison’s book first came out. One change that has occurred here in Montana is the passage and enactment of the Indian Education for All Act in 1999. Here is one line from that Act: “It is the intent of the legislature that in accordance with Article X, section 1(2), of the Montana constitution: every Montanan, whether Indian or non-Indian, be encouraged to learn about the distinct and unique heritage of American Indians in a culturally responsive manner.” I want to highlight here that this act refers to “every Montanan,” not just those who are students in public schools. After 22 years of this act being law, you might think that many if not most people in Montana would have at least a basic knowledge about the history and heritage of the Native peoples of this land. It would be helpful if many or even all of us knew that the arrival of Columbus and the other European colonists who followed him wasn’t just a heroic adventure. It was also a genocide of the Native Peoples of this continent.

Over the past five years I have been involved in offering a program titled “Roots of Injustice, Seeds of Change: Toward Right Relationship with Native Peoples.” This “Toward Right Relationship” program presents 500 years of history with a focus on the Native Peoples of this land. In February and March of this year I assisted with a book study of the UUA’s common read book titled, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*. In the course of facilitating the Toward Right Relationships programs and the book study, it has become very clear to me that most of us don’t know very much about the history of the Native Peoples’ of this land. I want to offer here some examples that back up my claim. At the end of one “Toward Right Relationship” program I helped with, a recently retired elementary teacher asked, with tears in her eyes, “Why wasn’t I ever taught any of this so I could share it with my students?” At the end of another program a high school senior shared her disappointment with her public school education. She told us she hadn’t learned the history of how Native People were treated over the centuries in any of her classes at school. And in the book study, none of the participants knew that the American Unitarian Association established an Indian boarding school in southeast Montana in 1886. The founding of that school is a very small part of the history of the Native People of Montana. It is also part of our history as Unitarian Universalists. And yet this history about the boarding school was new information to the book study participants.

Situations such as these have convinced me that the indictment of the early public education system that Zinn made in 1980 continues to have merit today. It may be less true today than it was 41 years ago, but it continues to be true to a greater extent than it ought to be. That said, I want to state clearly that progress is being made. After 22 years of the Indian Education Act for All being the law in the State of Montana however, the progress which has been made is insufficient. As a result, the Native Peoples of this state continue to suffer and be denied what they are due. At the very least, they are due acknowledgement, respect and equal treatment under the law. They are due public acknowledgement for what they have endured and continue to endure yet today. They deserve respect for who they are as individuals, communities, tribes and nations. And they are due equal treatment under the law, which, I am sad to say, they continually have to fight for.

You might be wondering at this point where I am going with this sermon titled “Holding History, But Which History.” To this point I have focused on the content of this morning’s reading. With that focus, I have attempted to point out the way those who have influence over the history that is commonly taught, have neglected or even attempted to bury the history of the Native People of this land. The Native People, however, are not alone in having their history neglected, ignored or even buried. Quite a number of other groups in this country have a similar experience.

The main characters in this morning’s Story for All Ages, namely, Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass, represent two such groups. While what is contained in the book *Two Friends* is not historically factual, Anthony and Douglass were friends. Both worked to address some of the most important social issues of their time. Both were committed to abolishing slavery and to gaining the right to vote for women. Their efforts demonstrated the experiences, the history if you will, of those who had common attributes. Douglass, who had African, Native American and European ancestry, was born into slavery. He was all too familiar with how slave owners, as well as others, sought to prevent people with African ancestry from knowing their history. Women of that time period also had their history, or would it be more accurate to say their herstory, minimized and denied. Such minimization and denial of history, or herstory, prevented people of African ancestry and women from connecting with and claiming their past. Such minimization and denial of history prevented them from experiencing their full worth.

Even today, there are aspects of history related to those of African ancestry and of women that are, at the very least, not commonly known, and quite possibly intentionally neglected or even suppressed. I will offer a couple of examples here, one specially related to people of African descent, and the other specifically related to women. Some of you may be aware of an event that occurred in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in May and June of 1921. That event is now referred to as the Tulsa Race Riot or the Tulsa Race Massacre. The Tulsa Massacre resulted in the destruction of the Greenwood District of Tulsa. The Greenwood District was home to an affluent African American community and it was sometimes referred to as “Black Wall Street.” Contemporary reports of the number of people killed during the massacre started as low as 36. Historians now believe as many as 300 people may have died. You may have heard about the Tulsa Race Massacre because this year is the 100th anniversary of the event. The massacre wasn’t commonly known about because such events were not publicized widely at that point in our nation’s history. It wasn’t until 2001, 80 years after the massacre occurred, that an official Race Riot Commission was organized to review the details of the event.

And now let’s consider a bit of women’s history in this country. One of the major social justice issues for women today is related to reproductive rights. Laws have recently been passed in states such as Arkansas, North Dakota and Texas that significantly reduce a woman’s ability to terminate a pregnancy. What most people aren’t aware of is that laws such as the ones in these states are much more restrictive than has been the case for most of America’s history. The very first line in an online article titled, “Scarlet Letters: Getting the History of Abortion and Conception Right,” published by [americanprogress.org](http://americanprogress.org), states the following. “Despite anit-abortion activist rhetoric, abortion and contraception have been legally practiced in America since the Pilgrim’s arrival.” And the second paragraph of the article states:

Abortion was not just legal—it was a safe, condoned and practiced procedure in colonial America and common enough to appear in the legal and medical records of the period. Official abortion laws did not appear on the books in the United States until 1821, and abortion before quickening did not become illegal until the 1860’s. If a woman living in New England in the 17th and 18th centuries wanted an abortion, no legal, social, or religious force would have stopped her.

According to the article, the word “quickening” refers to “the first time a woman feels the baby kick, which can be anywhere from 14 to 26 weeks into pregnancy.”

I find it interesting that laws restricting a woman’s ability to end a pregnancy began being enacted just about the time of Susan B. Anthony’s birth and throughout her lifetime. This was a period when women like Anthony were seeking to gain the right to vote. I find it very interesting that these two issues were occurring

at the same time. And I find it even more interesting that the choices women had regarding what they could do with their bodies were being restricted as the calls from and for women being allowed to vote were intensifying. Whatever view one holds about abortion, knowing the history of the options women of this nation have had in the past is important to the discussion about what options women of today deserve. The issues of contraception and abortion, after all, are about a woman's ability to make decisions about her body.

I have cited just a few examples where our knowledge of the past, of history, may be limited. There are many, many others. As we consider the history we are aware of and hold, I would suggest that we think about not just the history we know, but also the history we have yet to learn. I would encourage all of us to hold history not with a tight grip but with open hands, hearts and minds. The history we know is not complete. It is only partial. As a people who value and work for justice, we would be wise to continually seek to learn more of the histories and herstories of those whose past we haven't yet been informed about.

In closing, I want to share another excerpt from Zinn's book, *A Peoples' History of the United States*.

But I do remember (in rough paraphrase) a statement I once read: "The cry of the poor is not always just, but if you don't listen to it, you will never know what justice is." I don't want to invent victories for people's movements. But to think that history-writing must aim simply to recapitulate the failures that dominate the past is to make historians collaborators in an endless cycle of defeat. If history is to be creative, to anticipate a possible future without denying the past, it should, I believe, emphasize new possibilities by disclosing those hidden episodes from the past when, even in brief flashes, people showed their ability to resist, to join together, occasionally to win. I am supposing, or perhaps only hoping, that our future may be found in the past's fugitive moments of compassion rather than in its solid centuries of warfare.

So may it be.