

The Stories We Honor

Sermon by Reverend Laurel Gray

October 13, 2024

Why, in honor of Indigenous People's Day, would I start with epistemology? Why would I start with the study of knowledge, the question of how we know what we know and how we discern what is true?

Because we have to consider who is believed and the extraordinary risk in dismissing someone's experience, especially at the scale of entire groups of people.

Remember the "me too" movement? That movement was addressing this same issue—the question of who is believed and what can happen when any group of people is systematically dismissed, dehumanized, discredited, and treated as though they are untrustworthy sources of truth.

Who is believed and what is at stake with dismissing someone's story?

This country has a long and horrific history of holding the experience of white people as more valid, as more normal and more trustworthy, than anyone else. The poem that we just listened to speaks to this dynamic: The dominant narrative about our country's history centers the white settlers and turns the indigenous people into caricatures or collateral.

Whose experience is considered a valid source of truth?

In modern Unitarian Universalism, we have something we call the six sources, which is in addition to the seven principles. The principles are the promise we make about how we'll live, whereas the sources are about how we find wisdom. The third of the six sources is the world's religions, so the list is pretty all-encompassing.

But for the purposes of today, I want to focus on the first and the last sources. The first source of wisdom is direct experience; if this sounds to you like those old transcendentalists marveling at the natural world, you are correct. The sixth source is Earth-centered traditions, which I would also call Indigenous knowledge.

And this is not to say that you need to be

personally utilizing all six sources. No one person can practice all the world's religions while studying science, loving their neighbor, and trying to live in harmony with nature. The point of the six sources is to say that these are all valid sources of wisdom or knowledge. Because, as Unitarian Universalists, we hold that there are many ways to experience what is sacred and what is fundamental and important.

I often think of religious traditions like I think of languages: There are lots of ways to tell the truth, so speak the words you know. Saying that we hold all these sources as valid doesn't mean we need to be fluent in all of them.

Now, modern Unitarian Universalism has only existed since 1961, after the Unitarians and the Universalists merged into one denomination. The six sources, however, weren't adopted until 1984.

While we UUs do squarely hold that Indigenous knowledge is a valid source of truth, our religious lineage is not one that has always treated Indigenous people with dignity and respect.

I would rather we tell the truth. I think it is part of our responsibility as people of faith to honor the horrors of our past, to remember the stories, and to choose to act differently now. And while our tradition does now regard the experience of Indigenous people as valid, it did not always.

Before we remember this history, I want to say that I am going to tell this story in a way that is factual, but not descriptive. How we tell stories from a place of power matters. I want us all to know these truths about our tradition so they can inform our choices and commitments, but I don't want this sanctuary to be a place for experiencing new horror.

Returning to our central question: What is possible when we see someone's experience as untrustworthy or insignificant? If their experience doesn't matter, then what kind of treatment becomes possible? This is the danger of dehumanization, of believing a person or group is sub-human, as lacking humanity or some spark of divinity.

The Stories We Honor

October 13, 2024 *page 2*

We know that Indigenous people have been seen as sub-human in this nation and are often still treated as such. And our religious ancestors were part of the horrific violence committed against Indigenous people through residential schools.

There has been a lot more public awareness in the last few years about the reality of residential schools that were explicitly created to strip native youth of their culture and turn them into white men.

My colleague Rev. Rachael Hayes wrote this about these residential schools:

"The survivors of the system described the physical and psychological abuse they experienced there. Children were tortured for speaking their own language or observing their cultural and religious practices. RoseAnne Archibald says this about the system: 'I don't like to call them schools—they were institutions of assimilation and genocide. And our survivors said that for the longest time they were told stories of the deaths and murders that happened in these schools.'

It is estimated that up to one in 20 children died in these residential schools. In the schools inspected by Indian Affairs chief medical officer Peter Bryce in 1907, 25 percent of children forced to attend the schools died. In one school, 69 percent of the children died. They suffered malnutrition, inadequate shelter, medical experimentation, and tuberculosis in addition to other violence. When they were ill, they were removed without parental knowledge to segregated Indian hospitals, which were underfunded and also had abysmal survival rates. Only a fraction of the graves have been recovered."

It was not until the last few years that I had any idea that our own Unitarian ancestors had participated in the horrific cruelty of these schools. But we did. And the silence of religious institutions around their own violent histories is its own act of cruelty. So, just as we focus on what we are doing well, so must we own the reality of harm done and do what we can to live in contrast to violence. This country is, after all,

not one entirely made of immigrants and our ancestors participated in the genocide of native people.

According to Rev. Hayes, "The Unitarians made three missionary attempts to run boarding schools. In 1855, a mission to the Chippewa/Ojibwa failed due to lack of funding. The mission to the Utes near White River, Colorado, failed 'due to lack of encouragement' whatever that means, according to Unitarian historian Rev. George Willis Cooke. And the third, the Bond Mission School, was on the Crow reservation in Montana.

The Reverend Henry Bond and his wife Mrs. Bond set upon this mission to convert these children into proper, productive, civilized, assimilated members of his world. The records I found all come from people who seemed to believe that this was a worthwhile project, but we still have records stating that parents wanted to visit their children, but Bond would not permit it. Bond and his wife ran the mission from 1886 to 1895, when it was taken over by the federal government."

Unsurprisingly, all of the records I found in my research are written from Bond's perspective. His words are, frankly, chilling to read and I won't recreate them by reading them to you. It's as if the genocidal project was, to him, a joyful calling. These are the horrors that become possible when we view a group of people as sub-human. Even to this day, any accounts told by the children in the "schools" or their families are nearly impossible to find.

I took a class on religion and ecology in grad school, and we had a guest speaker named Tiacasín Ghost Horse. He shared his own experience of growing up as a native person in a country where his culture was treated as a threat. He shared that before the Freedom of Religion act was signed into law in 1978, native people weren't allowed to speak their own languages. They weren't even allowed to walk in groups of more than three because then it constituted a "riot."

It is a particular trick of white supremacy to see people gathering and speaking their own language and call that an act of violence.

The Stories We Honor

October 13, 2024 *page 3*

Storytelling and listening are powerful, precisely because they work to validate and honor the experiences of persecuted people as true and important.

The stories of these children who were kept and killed in these residential schools matter. These stories are true, and they are trustworthy. Even if we don't have a record of the children's words, we know that their experience was real, and it was horrific. That horror is part of our religious legacy. By honoring these stories as sacred sources of truth, we honor the humanity of the people who lived these experiences.

So I offer you this, especially those of us who are white:

Notice who you automatically believe and who you're inclined to question. Notice how groups of people are treated in public discourse and the media—whose experience is seen as truthful and whose is not. And whose truth matters? The work of the 8th principle that FRS formally adopted earlier this year is to work against systems of white supremacy that treat some people as more human than others.

We can hold the fullness of the truth together, honoring the horrors of the past while recommitting to treat the experiences of marginalized people as sacred sources of truth.

I want to end with words from Mike Adams, who is a Lil'wat Indian and a member of the Unitarian Church of Los Alamos:

For the generations who survived being hunted, who endured the theft and destruction of our people's lands, and who persevered through the theft and indoctrination of our children, we are grateful that you survived and for the resilience you have passed on to us.

Because you did these things, we are still here.

For the activists who stood against corruption and who forced a spotlight onto our people's mistreatment, we are grateful for your commitment.

Because of it, we are still here.

For the people who never consented to the sacrifices that were forced from you, we

remember you, we mourn your suffering and loss, we honor you as best we can, we do this because we are still here.

For the future generations, we ask that you remember. We look to you to keep our people's future alive, after we're gone. We ask you to find strength in your ancestors and use the resilience of your people to create your future and that of your children. We ask you to ensure that when we are gone, through you, we are still here.

Blessed Be and Amen.

Endnotes:

<https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2021/07/20/canada-indigenous-schools>

Rev. Rachael Hayes, "Sacred Footprints," sermon, 10/10/2021.

<https://www.fnesc.ca/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/IRSR11-12-DE-1906-1910.pdf>

<https://www.uua.org/braverwiser/reclaiming-my-culture>

Other sources:

<https://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/biographies/henry-frederick-bond/>

<https://prairiemaury.blogspot.com/2007/12/bonds-mission-school.html>

<https://uufeaston.org/services/many-inhabited-lands/>

https://www.danielharper.org/yauu/2023/09/documents-relating-to-the-ute-indians-and-the-unitarians/?fbclid=IwY2xjawF09LleHRuA2FlbQIXMAABHXIOiEZBbP-082G5Cyzd12I6-q9H3nKKAaI_i-H0Hu0umdIOhZrIV3Q5ZA_aem_zeseIK7aUyS-w57fxBZ9lw