



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
Spirituality · Community · Justice

## **Decolonizing, Healing, Rebalancing**

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[frederickuu.org](http://frederickuu.org)

For quite a few years now, there has been a growing trend urging the renaming of the 2nd Monday in October “Indigenous Peoples’ Day” instead of Columbus Day. This change shifts our focus *from* celebrating the beginning of European colonization on this continent *to* honoring indigenous people, history, and culture.

And on this Sunday before Indigenous Peoples’ Day it is significant to remember that more than five centuries ago when Europeans colonizers had first contact, there were an estimated 112 million indigenous people on this continent. 150 years later in 1650, European colonizers had decimated the indigenous population from 112 million to fewer than six million. Today there are “more than 573 federally recognized indigenous tribal nations in the mainland United States, but that also accounts for only “one-half of one percent of the total population of the United States” (Harjo 3).

As we hold in our hearts the hard truths that colonization has wrought on this and other lands, it is important to acknowledge as well that our beautiful UUCF land and building are on the traditional land of the Piscataway Tribe. If you put UUCF’s zip code (21703) into native-land.ca, you’ll see an image of the overlapping indigenous tribal territories that gives you a visual sense of the vast, interconnected people, languages, and cultures that originally thrived on this land long before Europeans arrived.

Along these lines, I invite you to view this photo taken a little more than a century ago in 1905 of a mountain the Lakota Sioux call “The Six Grandfathers.” It is

part of the Black Hills, which is sacred ground to the Lakota Sioux. In 1868, the U.S. Government signed a treaty promising the Black Hills and other surrounding territory to the Lakota Sioux. But when gold was discovered, this treaty was betrayed, resulting in the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre. I'll tell that story more fully in a future sermon. But for now, I want to keep our focus on this particular mountain.

In 1930, the U.S. Government not only renamed "The Six Grandfathers" as Mount Rushmore, but also proceeded to carve the heads of four U.S. Presidents into this sacred mountain. I will confess that growing up when I first saw a picture of Mount Rushmore, I thought it was an impressive feat of modern sculpture carving. But the more I have learned about history from an Indigenous Peoples' perspective, the more I've come to view this monument as a sacrilege—and the more beautiful the original photo seems: the mountain before 450,000 tons of granite were dynamited away. What a bald symbol of White Supremacy Culture: the impulse to carve four giant white male faces into a mountain? As a spokesperson for the Lakota Sioux has said, "[We] see the faces of men who lied, cheated and murdered innocent people whose only crime was living on land they wanted to steal."

Mount Rushmore is such a striking visual reminder of how colonization can cover over what came before. It is likewise worth noting that Gutzon Borglum, the sculptor of Mount Rushmore, was an avowed racist, who "attended Klan rallies, served on Klan committees and tried to play peacemaker in several Klan leadership disputes" —but "the National Park Service makes no mention of Borglum's ties to the Ku Klux Klan in its biography of the sculptor" ([The Washington Post](#)).

As you've heard me say before, the stories we tell matter. It matters which stories we tell, what we include, and what we exclude. It matters who decides what stories are told and who benefits from the results.

Along these lines, I invite you to hear a "[Poem on Disappearance](#)" by **Kimberly Blaeser**, an indigenous activist, environmentalist, and past Wisconsin poet laureate. As you hear her words, keep in mind the vast, interconnected thriving tribal nations that lived here prior to the arrival of European invaders:

Beginning with our continent, draw 1491:  
each mountain, compass point Indigenous;

trace trade routes, languages, seasonal migrations--  
don't become attached.

Yes, reshape by discovery, displacement  
move your pencil point quickly now as if pursued--  
a cavalry of possession that erases  
homelands: we shrink shrink--in time-lapse  
of colonial barter. . . disappear .

Now draw a brown face painted for ceremony,  
half a face, nothing

.

Draw nothing around a crumbled bird body--  
no wings.

Draw emptiness inside desecrated burial mounds,  
a stretch of absence where fallopian tubes once curved in hope  
sketch void across buffalo prairie, draw the empty  
of elk, of passenger pigeons, of silver trout.

Conjure with your hand the shape of girl  
blooming, curves of face, her laughing eyes;  
you've seen them posterred and amber-alerted--  
missing, missing, evening newsed, and gone.

Draw a woman wrapped in a blanket  
a child's body weighted--draw stones  
sinking into every river on the map.

Draw carrion blackening skies, carrion  
plucking vision from round brown faces

draw missing, draw murdered.

Work carefully now  
turn your hand to the new continent.  
Again picture it--

nothing

So much has been lost. The words of Blaeser's poem along with the photo of The Six Grandfathers reminds us how much has been destroyed. At the same time, the growing number of places celebrating Indigenous Peoples' Day instead of Columbus Day is one movement toward Indigenous Justice that gives me hope.

I'll give you another example. On this Sunday before Indigenous Peoples' Day, I can also report at long last that the Washington Football Team is changing its name from the racially derogatory term Redskins. In 1944, the National Congress of American Indians explicitly included in its mission "the elimination of negative stereotypes." That was almost eight decades ago. We're known better for a long time. Finally under growing pressure from corporate sponsors with multimillion dollar implications, the announcement came that the Washington Football Team would be changing its name. Sometimes change happens slowly, then all at once ([The Washington Post](#)).

Here's one more example. In July, the Supreme Court ruled 5-to-4 in favor of Indigenous Rights in the case of *McGirt v. Oklahoma*. Here's just one brief excerpt from the majority opinion;

We hold the government to its word [and the land Congress promised to the Creek Nation is still Indian land]. If Congress wishes to withdraw its promises, it must say so. Unlawful acts, performed long enough and with sufficient vigor, are never enough to amend the law. To hold otherwise would be to elevate the most brazen and longstanding injustices over the law, both rewarding wrong and failing those in the right.

Although this case mostly applies to a narrow aspect of criminal law in part of Oklahoma, it is an important precedent that could have future implications. In general, the Supreme Court's track record has been to rule against Indigenous People's Rights,

and this recent decision is a welcome change of holding the U.S. government to its word ([The Washington Post](#)).

If you are interested in learning more about what it might look like to live in a world that supports Indigenous Peoples' Rights and works toward dismantling the legacy of colonialism, I encourage you to attend the Friendly Forum that will start at 11:45 a.m. this morning, a few minutes after the end of this Sunday Service.

Jen, our Intern Minister, will facilitate a presentation and discussion of some of the ideas in Edgar Villanueva's important recent book [Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous Wisdom to Heal Divides and Restore Balance](#).

His book outlines seven steps toward healing: (1) grieve, (2) apologize, (3) listen, (4) relate, (5) represent, (6) invest, and (7) repair. His book is not the only way forward, but it is one glimpse of what it could look like to shift our culture from division toward *connection*, from control toward *relationship*, from exploitation toward *belonging*.

I invite you to take a deep breath in. And let it go. So much can seem entrenched, but another world is possible. I invite you to open your heart and mind to the possibilities that connection, relationship, and belonging can bring as we sing together ***Building a New Way***.