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CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

“Let the Earth Stabilize Your Postcolonial Insecure Jitters”:

Re-imagining, Decolonizing—and Indigenous People’s Day

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Tomorrow is the second Monday in October, a day increasingly being renamed from Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples’ Day ([NPR](#)). This change shifts our focus *from* celebrating the beginning of European colonization on this continent *to* remembering and honoring that, centuries before, the indigenous peoples of this land had advanced agriculture, sophisticated education and culture, and extensive transportation networks ([Dunbar Ortiz 2015: 30-31](#)).

And on this Sunday before Indigenous Peoples’ Day, it is both important and haunting to recall that in 1492, when European colonialists first arrived, there were an estimated 112 million Indigenous people on this continent. 150 years later, in 1650, European colonizers had decimated the indigenous population to fewer than six million, both from unintentional exposure to unfamiliar diseases and from violent conquest. By the end of the nineteenth century, the indigenous population was a mere 228,000. Depending on the sources historians used, the total number of indigenous peoples wiped out on this continent is somewhere between 90 percent on the low end and 99 percent on the high end ([Dunbar Ortiz 2015: 40](#)).

Today there are “more than 573 federally-recognized indigenous tribal nations in mainland United States; but that accounts for only “one-half of one percent of the total population of the United States” ([Harjo 3](#)). So much has been lost, but in remembering, we have the possibility of finding new ways forward.

Often, when I drive into downtown Frederick, I see a sign announcing that this city was founded in 1745; it is impressive that the city of Frederick has been around 276 years, more than three decades longer than the United States. But Frederick is also on the “ancestral and unceded lands of the Piscataway people, who have walked these hills for eight hundred years and more, and who remain an integral part of our community.” Eight hundred years takes us back to the 13th century, almost three centuries before Columbus sailed the ocean blue, and more than five centuries before the founding of the city of Frederick.

For a previous Indigenous Peoples’ Day Sunday Service here at UUCF, we reflected on Dr. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's powerful book, An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States, published by the UUA’s own Beacon Press. If you haven’t read it, I recommend it; it has also been released in a shorter, more accessible young people’s version. This year, part of what I would like to invite us to reflect on are highlights from Dr. Dunbar-Ortiz’s new book titled *Not “A Nation of Immigrants”*: *Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy, and a History of Erasure and Exclusion* (Beacon Press, 2021).

The title alone is a lot to take in. What does Dunbar-Ortiz mean by “*Not ‘A Nation of Immigrants?’*” Throughout my whole life, I have heard repeated that incomplete description: “The United States is a nation of immigrants.” It’s a phrase especially popular in the current struggle for immigration justice, since reminding people of their own family’s immigrant history can help mollify xenophobic fears of new immigrants to this country. All of that is true—and Dr. Dunbar-Ortiz challenges us to also notice that the descriptor “nation of immigrants” skips over the earlier part of our nation’s history, in which immigrants from Europe decimated our land’s original inhabitants

Before proceeding, it may be helpful to pause and consider all the various dynamics at play here. Rather than assuming an *either/or* situation in which a view is declared either completely correct or completely wrong, a *both/and* approach can sometimes be helpful. Sometimes *multiple perspectives can each conceal and reveal various aspects of the truth*. Can we make the space within ourselves to hold the tension of more than just one view?

From the perspective of contemporary dialogue regarding immigration justice, emphasis on the ways in which we are “a nation of immigrants” can help decrease xenophobia and other irrational fears about immigration. Likewise, it can be glorious to celebrate, along with Lin-Manuel Miranda’s version of *Hamilton*, that, “Immigrants—we get the job done!”

All that being said, are we also willing to recognize that from an indigenous peoples’ point of view, celebrating that this country is a “nation of immigrants” can feel like an erasure of their own devastating experience of settler colonialism—defined as the time when new settlers seek to claim a previous population’s territory. A commitment to make efforts toward reversing such settler colonial harms is called *decolonization*.

Before proceeding, it may be helpful to make a connection between decolonization and our ongoing work to dismantle racism and White Supremacy Culture. Since 2017, Unitarian Universalists have been increasingly serious about anti-racism. You can see that in the grassroots movements to pass a UU 8th Principle at the congregation level, which we have done here at UUCF— “Journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.” You can also see a growing commitment to anti-racism in the recent *Widening the Circle of Concern* report produced by the UUA’s Commission on Institutional Change. Following the recommendations in that report, we’re now in the second year of a five-year process to make a series of systemic changes designed to make the UU association of congregations more multicultural. (And we will certainly need to continue this justice work in perpetuity after those five years end. It’s just that five years is the length of the current plan for institutional change.)

All of that is great *and* this is another of those places where *differing perspectives can both conceal and reveal various aspects of truth*. There is so much wisdom in the UU 8th Principle for dismantling racism, *and* it is also true that from an indigenous people’s perspective, the 8th Principle is not enough.

To be clear, the decolonization issue is far larger than the UU 8th Principle—both nationally and globally. In general, indigenous scholars have called for understanding of

the deeper need to **“Decolonize Anti-Racism”** (278). Such decolonization can mean at least two things. First, it can mean literally undoing colonization, which at its most basic level would require giving land back to the first indigenous groups to the greatest extent possible. Second, decolonization can mean the process of increasingly centering indigenous peoples and perspectives, indigenous wisdom and knowledge, and indigenous ways of being in the world (278).

So, *decolonizing antiracism* is about recognizing the ways, in Dr. Dunbar-Ortiz’s words, that **anti-racism alone can be “complicit with the settler-colonial agenda”** (278). Multiple perspectives and times can be potential sources of truth, so re-learning U.S. history from the perspectives of the 1619 Project, which emphasizes the importance of telling the U.S. story in a way that centers the arrival of the first enslaved Africans within the English colony of Virginia, is extraordinarily important, even as the movement to decolonize anti-racism calls on us to start that story even earlier—with the theft of today’s lands from our original inhabitants.

Indigenous scholars further challenge us to recognize that even the call to multiculturalism (which is a really good thing in so many ways) can be a “mechanism for avoiding acknowledgment of settler colonialism” (270). Here’s the way one scholar of decolonization has put it:

If America’s greatest social successes have been registered on the frontier of race, the same cannot be said of the frontier of colonialism. If the race question makes the cutting edge of American reform, the native question highlights the limits of that reform. The thrust of American struggles has been to deracialize but not to decolonize. **A deracialized America still remains a settler society and a settler state.** (270)

That is some hard truth: that even if we do make reparations and close the racial wealth gap—and make other related changes necessary for racial justice—all of that alone still will not address earlier injustices done to the indigenous peoples of this land.

Currently, the UUA has formed an Article II Commission to make a proposed revision to Article II of the UUA Bylaws, which is where our UU Principles are formally located. The latest update I have heard is that we should anticipate a report from the Article II Commission this summer at the UU General Assembly, with votes to follow in

summer 2023 and summer 2024. I suspect that the final version of what the Article II Commission proposes for our UU principles will explicitly call us to both Anti-Racism *and* Decolonization, but I don't know for sure. Time will tell.

Regardless, what would it mean if we were to take decolonization seriously? I do think that one important starting point is compassion, empathy, and *grief*: opening our hearts, minds, and spirits to feel the deep harm that has occurred. But we can't stop there. For any truth and reconciliation process to have integrity, there must be not only truth-telling, but also accountable efforts toward repairing harm and restoring right relationship (Hager and Mawopiyane 177).

To that end, let me share a few highlights from a second book that I've been reading as part of my own process of preparation and reflection for this year's Indigenous Peoples' Day. It's titled *The Gatherings: Reimagining Indigenous-Settler Relations* by Shirley Hager and Mawopiyane (Aevo UTP, 2021). It is a record of transformative conversations that happened more than thirty years ago between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people about settler colonialism and decolonization. These conversations are only now being published as growing numbers of people are becoming concerned about these problems.

The whole book is worth reading, but for our purposes here, I particularly want to share with you three points of hope:

1. The non-Indigenous participants in these gatherings found that their deeper takeaway was not "white guilt" for all the transgressions of the past. As it turns out, guilt alone doesn't accomplish much and hurts many. Rather, the participants came away more with humility and compassion, a much greater awareness of how much they had to learn, and a deeper gratitude for the ongoing relationships that had been built between native and non-native people (198).
2. A second point of hope is that centering Indigenous perspectives can dramatically increase the development of ecological ways of being in the world that are much more sustainable for this planet longterm compared to egocentric, colonial approaches based in dominance, control, and greed. There are significant ways that practicing decolonization can contribute to the work of climate justice (10,

183). Along these lines, if you haven't read the book Braiding Sweetgrass, I highly recommend it.

3. The third point of hope is some small but significant political moves in the right direction, such as Deb Haaland becoming the First Native American Cabinet Secretary. Consider that, "As Interior Secretary, Ms. Haaland runs an agency once responsible for eradicating the homes, the culture and often the lives of Indigenous people" (The New York Times).

Along those lines, I want to move toward my conclusion by sharing with you one really interesting and provocative example I read recently of the decolonial imagination at work.

Did any of you read the article *The Atlantic* published a few months ago titled, "Return the National Parks to the Tribes." It's worth checking out. While many people concede that there is not much likelihood at this point of relocating 300+ million non-native people currently living in this country and giving all their land back, the article about returning at least the national parks is an interesting proposition by an Indigenous writer.

The article includes caveats, of course, such as maintaining standards of conservation and universal access. But such an action could be one among many needed acts of reparation. And there are international precedents for transfers of national landmarks to indigenous peoples in both Australia and New Zealand. There is also precedent in the U.S; in 1999, the U.S. ceded full control of the Panama Canal back to Panama. In the words of the article: "**It doesn't happen often, but the United States has given things back**" (The Atlantic).

For now, I invite you to hear a poem by Joy Harjo, our current United States Poet Laureate, and the first enrolled member of a Native American tribe to hold that position. As with Haaland, serving as Secretary of the Interior, Harjo's role is part of a much-needed process of centering Indigenous perspectives.

The poem I would like to share with you is titled "For Calling the Spirit Back from Wandering the Earth in Its Human Feet" and is from her 2015 collection, *Conflict Resolution From Holy Beings*. As you hear this poem, listen for any words or phrases

that particularly resonate with you and give you perhaps a glimpse of hope or inspiration for postcolonial re-imaginings:

Put down that bag of potato chips, that white bread, that bottle of pop.

Turn off that cellphone, computer, and remote control.

Open the door, then close it behind you.

Take a breath offered by friendly winds. They travel the earth gathering essences of plants to clean.

Give back with gratitude.

If you sing it will give your spirit lift to fly to the stars' ears and back.

Acknowledge this earth who has cared for you since you were a dream planting itself precisely within your parents' desire.

Let your moccasin feet take you to the encampment of the guardians who have known you before time, who will be there after time.

They sit before the fire that has been there without time.

Let the earth stabilize your postcolonial insecure jitters.

Be respectful of the small insects, birds and animal people who accompany you.

Ask their forgiveness for the harm we humans have brought

down upon them.

Don't worry.

The heart knows the way though there may be high-rises, interstates, checkpoints, armed soldiers, massacres, wars, and those who will despise you because they despise themselves.

The journey might take you a few hours, a day, a year, a few years, a hundred, a thousand or even more.

Watch your mind. Without training it might run away and leave your heart for the immense human feast set by the thieves of time.

Do not hold regrets.

When you find your way to the circle, to the fire kept burning by the keepers of your soul, you will be welcomed.

You must clean yourself with cedar, sage, or other healing plant.

Cut the ties you have to failure and shame.

Let go the pain you are holding in your mind, your shoulders, your heart, all the way to your feet. Let go the pain of your ancestors to make way for those who are heading in our direction.

Ask for forgiveness.

Call upon the help of those who love you. These helpers take many forms: animal, element, bird, angel, saint, stone, or ancestor.

Call yourself back. You will find yourself caught in corners and creases of shame, judgment, and human abuse.

You must call in a way that your spirit will want to return.
Speak to it as you would to a beloved child.

Welcome your spirit back from its wandering. It will return in pieces, in tatters. Gather them together. They will be happy to be found after being lost for so long.

Your spirit will need to sleep awhile after it is bathed and given clean clothes.

Now you can have a party. Invite everyone you know who loves and supports you. Keep room for those who have no place else to go.

Make a giveaway, and remember, keep the speeches short.

Then, you must do this: help the next person find their way through the dark.

As we hold these words in our hearts, and open our spirits to Earth-centered traditions, may we together seek to “Let the earth stabilize our postcolonial insecure jitters.”