

Indigenous People

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First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

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Last winter the Plattsburgh, NY City School Board voted to change Columbus Day to Indigenous People's Day on district calendars. It was prompted by middle schoolers who had studied firsthand accounts of Columbus' history in the New World. They were appalled to learn that Columbus enslaved the natives and was so cruel and tyrannical that Spanish officials arrested him and stripped him of his titles. (Pat Bradley, Midday Magazine, Sept. 23, 2016)

The idea of replacing Columbus Day with a day celebrating the indigenous people of North America first arose in 1977, but really started gaining ground in 1992, when people in Berkeley, CA organized to protest a Quicentennial Jubilee celebrating 500 years since Columbus sailed the ocean blue. The City of Berkeley renamed Columbus Day "Indigenous People's Day" that year to "protest the historical conquest of North America by Europeans, and to call attention to the demise of Native American people and culture through disease, warfare, massacre and forced assimilation." (Wikipedia)

Since then other cities around the country have made the change, and in a list of municipalities that have done so, I noticed that the Cornell University Student Assembly voted unanimously to approve a resolution recommending that the provost amend the university's calendar to recognize Indigenous People's Day. The state of Vermont just joined the list, and there are a few states that never recognized Columbus Day; namely South Dakota, Alaska, Oregon and Hawaii.

When I was young, perhaps middle school or shortly after, I had learned enough about Native American tribes, their cultures and their hardships to think I might like to work with them, to help improve their circumstances. I mentioned this to my mother, who discouraged me, telling me that the Bureau of Indian Affairs didn't actually help the Indians.

This would have been the early 1970's—a time when native groups like the American Indian Movement were rising up to demand enforcement of treaty rights and sovereignty. In 1972 members of the movement took over the Bureau of Indian Affairs building in Washington, DC as the culmination of their Trail of Broken Treaties Walk.

And in 1973 American Indian Movement activists and some Oglala Lakota of the Pine Ridge Reservation occupied the town of Wounded Knee in protest of the US government's failure to fulfill treaties with Native American people. The occupation attracted media coverage and garnered widespread public sympathy, as Americans were becoming more aware of longstanding issues of injustice related to Native Americans.

So I never went to work for the BIA, but I also never gave up my feeling that my people took just about everything from the indigenous people on this continent, and that we need to give back.

so much has been lost
so much

Ever since Europeans set foot on this continent, we have been treating the native peoples badly. I need to say that I speak from a thoroughly Euro-centric perspective. My ancestors on both sides of my family go back hundreds of years in this country and ultimately trace back to England. So when I say “we” I mean that to be people like me who identify as Euro-centric. I realize that not everybody may relate to that identity.

We took so much. We took the land, the land they lived on, the land that provided their way of life, their livelihood. The land that provided the deer and the buffalo, the water and the trees. The land that was sacred, that held sacred places in the mountains, in the graveyards, in the lakes. We couldn't see the holy spirit of the land because we wanted material gains—we wanted rich soil for planting, or gold or silver in the mountains, or oil in the ground.

We tried to appear fair, to them and to our own consciences, by negotiating treaties. We negotiated treaty after treaty, and we broke treaty after treaty. If we wanted the land, we took it by any means we could. We fought battles and wars as we kept coming and they kept trying to hold onto what little they had.

We took the best and pushed them to what was left. We pushed them west, and forced them into reservations so that we could have all the rest. We moved them from their ancestral lands to the most barren, inhospitable land. Their survival had depended on the land, the land they no longer had access to. We thus took away their livelihood, and forced them to live in extreme poverty.

so much has been lost
so much

Then we took their children away from them and made them go to residential schools where they were forced to give up their languages, their cultures and their religious practices. Even their hair. We wanted to help them by trying to make them like us. Assimilate, that's how to succeed, we thought.

Not only did we take, we also brought so much. We brought diseases like smallpox that wiped out huge numbers of the native population. We brought alcohol, which the natives found difficult to tolerate. It has destroyed families and communities, and continues to cause problems.

After I graduated college with my degree in linguistics, I learned of a tribe living near Potsdam, NY, where I was staying with my parents for a while. The tribe is Akwesasne of the Mohawk nation and straddles the US and Canada. I had become fascinated with American Indian languages in my studies, and was saddened that so many were being lost. Through my mother's work at Planned Parenthood, I was connected with someone who took me there to meet one of the few remaining elders that still spoke their ancestral language. I was able to sit with the woman and her daughter and hear the language that so few now spoke. It felt like quite an honor.

Unfortunately, I realized that with just an undergraduate degree I really didn't have the skills to record and preserve their beautiful, disappearing language. It pained me then and I wonder now if the language is gone.

*so much has been lost
so much*

So many unique, beautiful languages lost. So many unique, beautiful cultures lost. So much injustice, so many wrongs.

And the saddest thing of all is that we are still doing it to them. We are still taking their land when it turns out there was something of value in it after all. We are still treating them like lesser human beings.

Native Americans face issues of mass incarceration and policing. The statistics and the stories are very much like what we're learning about the African American population, but these similar injustices are largely unreported.

Native communities are often impoverished and jobless. For instance, at the Standing Rock Reservation the poverty rate is over 40 percent and the unemployment rate is over 60 percent. Native American communities — and particularly Native women and children — suffer from an epidemic of violence, and over 80% of this violence is committed by non-native Americans. The education system is failing Native students. Only 51 percent of Native Americans in the class of 2010 graduated high school. This is due in large part to inadequate federal funding. Native patients receive inadequate health care, again due to an underfunded federal agency.

There's a dearth of capital and financial institutions in Native communities. It surprised me to learn that Indian nations do not own their reservation lands. Rather, the lands are held in trust by the federal government. This prevents Native Americans who live on reservations from leveraging their assets for loans, making it difficult for them to start businesses or promote economic growth in the area.

And the latest issue facing Native Americans is the Dakota Access pipeline that an oil company wants to run from North Dakota to Illinois, with part of it running too close for comfort to the water supply of the Standing Rock Reservation. Members of the tribes have been protesting, or as they put it, protecting the land and the water, and as news of the protest has spread, others have come to South Dakota to join the Lakota Sioux. Indigenous people have come from Hawaii, from all across North America and beyond. President Obama put a halt on construction of the pipeline after an indigenous woman in Laos asked him about it. It has become a global indigenous movement.

This resistance campaign, many say, has emerged as part of a greater global crisis—a united struggle in which indigenous lands, resources, and people are perpetually threatened by corporations and governments often using military force. This campaign also comes from concern about the harm being done to the earth, something indigenous people are especially sensitive to. It is about so much more than one pipeline in one particular place in South Dakota.

It is actually inspiring to see so many come together to support each other and make their voices heard. It is hopeful to see how much attention this effort is attracting, and how many people are speaking in sympathy.

*so much has been lost
so much, yet all is not lost, not yet . . .*

What can we do?

We can stand on the side of love with all indigenous people.

We can get informed about the issues they are facing, beyond what is reported in the mainstream media.

We can contribute to schools and colleges on reservations, so that they can get the education needed to help pull themselves and their people out of poverty.

We can educate others about the issues native populations face.

We can raise our voices in solidarity, and do whatever we can to help stem the tide of losses.

I feel a need to take responsibility for the losses our society has caused and I want to do what I can to give back. I invite you to do the same.