



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Indigenous Peoples Day”

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A sermon delivered October 6, 2013

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

*Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information.*

Article 15, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, September 13, 2007

*In the Two Row Wampum [the first agreement between European settlers and Natives], it's stated, all the teachings that we shared from the Great Law of Peace, we shared with these newcomers to the forest. And so, in doing so, we also told them to be respectful of all and only take from Mother Earth as what you need to survive. And so this agreement came about. And what the Two Row represents is the Haudenosaunee people in their canoe, traveling down the river of life alongside the newcomers in their vessel, their ship. Chief Jack Edwards, Onondaga Nation, at the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, August 9, 2013*

### Reflection *(delivered after a reflection by John Winterhawk of the Muskogee Creek tribe)*

John Winterhawk just shared with us a heart-filled story of how he came to be the spiritual leader of his people. He told us something of what it's like to walk in two cultures and to make one meaning out of two identities. He helped us appreciate the wisdom and spirituality of the Muskogee Creek, a spirituality that teaches respect for the environment and which resonates with many here.

Perhaps some of you blend different cultures to be who you are, too. My ancestral identity comes from one northern European culture, though I try, if not to walk in another's shoes, at least to feel and understand another's experience. I do this to better live out my Unitarian Universalist principles—to affirm and promote every person's inherent worth and dignity; to seek greater justice, equality and freedom for all; to discover truth, however difficult; and to act knowing what I do affects others in our shared web of existence.

Abenaki wisdom-keeper and storyteller Joseph Bruchac writes in the book *Rethinking Columbus*, “Our Creator gave each of us two ears. Thus we have the ability to listen to both sides.”

One story, one side of what it means to be an American is told each year when federal and local governments officially observe Columbus Day. This coming Saturday, October 12<sup>th</sup>, is the

anniversary of Christopher Columbus' first steps on these shores. On the following Monday many schools, banks, and Post Offices will close. Some towns will hold parades. Federal workers will have a day off work, if they aren't already off because of the latest congressional dysfunction.

This annual observance honors Columbus' courageous voyage west in 1492 to establish a new route to India and the Far East. It also lifts up everything that followed after it as a new beginning in a new world. But naming the world 'new' relegates what came before as old or passé. It implies that whatever was there before European discovery was inconsequential, as if the new world was an empty, uncharted wilderness just waiting for civilizing hands. Celebrating Columbus Day romanticizes Columbus and those who followed him and makes unimportant the tragic cost of the European conquest paid by the first inhabitants of this land. Celebrating Columbus Day denies the 10-20,000 year history of people living on this land. And those living here when Europeans arrived were not waiting for what Columbus would bring.

Columbus and those who followed brought death. Of the 100 million native people living on what we now call North and South America, 90% of them died in the first century after contact, mostly from the spread of European diseases, particularly smallpox. Thousands more lost their lives brutally and violently, or from the less-immediate consequences of forced removal from their homelands, settlement in reservations established on unsustainable land, and limitations imposed on their cultural expression. For many of this nation's current citizens, Columbus Day is a day to mourn their ancestor's death and the attempted killing of their culture.

To be fair, Europeans were not alone in committing atrocities. Native Americans committed their share in response. And there were acts of respect and kindness expressed on both sides, too. One side was not wholly evil and the other side wholly good. History is never that simple. And history cannot be undone.

Yet the future is ours to write. Will it be written that we justified and continued to carry out human rights violations against indigenous peoples here or elsewhere? I'd like it to read that we acted on our UU Principles and changed the world.

I am grateful for the wisdom and spirituality of the Creek people John shared with us earlier. I am glad times have changed so that, unlike his great grandparents and those who came before them, he and his family can be open about who they are. They know they have worth and dignity and we are blessed by John's willingness to share his culture and traditions.

Many of us regret the past enslavement of Africans and now seek reconciliation, equality, and justice for African-Americans. I believe we also can seek healing and wholeness with the descendants of those who lived on this land when Europeans arrived and whose humanity was denied. Our Principles call on us to learn about the injustice of the past, and act to end them. If we do not, we'll be failing our Principles and values, and our spirits will suffer.

To begin addressing these issues, at the UU General Assembly in Phoenix, AZ, last year, a resolution was approved which called on us to repudiate the historical justification for denying the fully human status of non-Christians which came to be known as the Doctrine of Discovery.

The Doctrine of Discovery was formed from a series of papal decrees, issued in 1454 through 1494. According to this doctrine, Christians have the God-given right to take non-Christian lands and property, as well as assert political control over indigenous people. Columbus was empowered by the Pope to, quote: "...capture, vanquish and subdue the [Muslim] Saracens, Pagans and other enemies of Christ, and put them into perpetual slavery and to take all their

possessions and their property.”

Blessed by the highest religious authority, the one closest to God, Columbus served as an instrument of the Roman Catholic Church in its holy wars.

The Doctrine of Discovery became settled law promoting the conquest, colonization, and exploitation of non-Christian territories and peoples. The UU General Assembly resolution identifies the Doctrine of Discovery “still the basis used by courts today to violate existing treaties with Native peoples and take away, for example, their mineral and water rights. As people of faith, we are called to understand and dislodge the Doctrine of Discovery and its present-day effects, and advocate for our government to fully implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, an aspirational declaration passed by the United Nations in 2007 and to which the United States became a signatory in 2010.”

Among those items not fully implemented is the dismantling of, quote, “all doctrines, policies and practices based on or advocating superiority of peoples or individuals on the basis of national origin or racial, religious, ethnic or cultural differences [as] racist, scientifically false, legally invalid, morally condemnable and socially unjust.” Use of the Doctrine of Discovery must end.

The U.N. Declaration continues by identifying rights long-denied indigenous groups that must be granted, such as self-determination, cultural expression, and right to use their land as they determine.

Although it does not appear in the Declaration, the U.N. named August 9<sup>th</sup> of each year to be Indigenous Peoples Day, when the cultural contributions and rights of native peoples would be honored. Four states, including our neighbor, Alabama, no longer observe Columbus Day and celebrate instead some version of an Indigenous or Native American Day. With our help, perhaps Georgia soon will be added to that growing list.

I invite you now to settle into your seats for a moment of silence to meditate, pray, or reflect upon the road you walk towards truth and meaning. In what way has a dominant story clouded a larger truth from your eyes? What might you do to bring healing and wholeness to yourself and others?

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. What is or has been your experience connecting with or being a person of an indigenous people or culture? How has this informed or impacted you?
2. Does the spirituality and/or wisdom of an indigenous culture resonate with you? Share.
3. How might UUFA keep/develop meaningful agreements with indigenous people of Athens?