UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST
CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

"An Indigenous People's History of the United States"

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg
11 October 2015
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Maryland
frederickuu.org

In August, the Frederick County Council voted by a slim 4-to-3 margin to repeal an "English-only" ordinance that had been passed in 2012. In reading the many impassioned letters to the editor about this issue, one missing component from almost all the English-only supporters was an acknowledgement of the history of this land, now called Frederick, prior to the founding of the United States, less than 250 years ago. Many of the arguments seemed grounded in a worldview that English is clearly the first, only, and best language for this land — and that it should be the unquestioned norm for the future. That perspective reminds me of a political cartoon in which a white man in an expensive suit is yelling at a Latino family, "It's time to reclaim America from the illegal immigrants!" Off to the side, an American Indian with his arms crossed responds, "I'll help you pack."

Regarding some of the false mythologies around our county's history, one of the most common 'sins of omission' is starting the story far too late with the first major highlight being Columbus's arrival in the Americas. But this Eurocentric version of events omits literally *millennia* of history on this continent. As Dr. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's details in her important book An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States, it may be true that "In fourteen hundred ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue," but *10,000 years earlier* in approximately 8,500 B.C.E., semi-nomadic groups of hunter-gatherers began to practice agriculture in seven different places:

> Three of the seven were in the Americas, all based on corn: the Valley of Mexico and Central America (Mesoamerica); the South-Central Andes in South America; and eastern North America. The other early agricultural centers were the Tigris-Euphrates and Nile River systems, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Yellow River of northern China, and the Yangtze River of southern China. (15)

Over the next 10,000 years, indigenous people on this continent developed "complex irrigation systems — put in place at least two thousand years *before* Europeans knew the Americas existed" (16).

In the tenth-century, five hundred years before Columbus, the Mayans built breathtaking city-states whose structures continue to astonish to this day at Chichen-Itzá, Mayapán, Uxmal, and other such sites (18):

> Mayan culture…is often compared to Greek (Athenian culture)…. The Mayan people developed art, architecture, sculpture, and painting…. Surrounded by rubber trees, they invented the rubber ball and court ball games similar to modern soccer…. By 36 B.C.E. they had developed the concept of zero. [And] they worked with numbers in the hundreds of millions…. Modern astronomers have marveled at the accuracy of Mayan charts of the movements of the moon and planets, which were used to predict eclipses and other events. (19)

Also centuries before Columbus, the Anasazi, who lived in the Chaco Canyon — "in the present day Four Corners region of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah" — "constructed more than four hundred miles of roads radiating out from Chaco. Averaging thirty feet wide, these roads followed straight courses, even through difficult terrain such as hills and rock formations. The highways connected some seventy-five communities" (22). Many indigenous groups also had a regular practice of burning the undergrowth in surrounding forests as part of cultivating the land (28).

The European myth tells of discovering a "New World" of "virgin wilderness" populated by primitive tribes of hunter-gatherers. From this perspective, the Europeans viewed themselves as bringing both civilization and the 'One, True Religion' of Christianity to save 'primitive heathens' in this world and the next. But centuries before the Colonial Period of U.S. history, the

indigenous peoples of this land had advanced agriculture, sophisticated education and culture, and extensive transportation networks (30-31).

Tomorrow, Monday, October 12 is known as Columbus Day and commemorates the anniversary of Columbus landing in the Americas on October 12, 1492. But it turns out that even though our nation's capital (the District of Columbia) is named after him, Columbus didn't "discover America" — at least in the sense that he never set foot in North America, much less on the land known today as The United States. Columbus's first voyage landed in what is now the Dominican Republic and Haiti. And he did not come to bring life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to the indigenous people; rather, he returned home with enslaved members of the Indigenous population and stolen gold (43). When he returned on his second voyage, what he "discovered" was that the colony of forty men he had left had all been killed by the Indigenous people. Disregarding the resistance of the Indigenous people, Columbus enslaved "four hundred Arawak" natives to take back to Spain. On his third trip, he landed in what is now Venezuela, and on his fourth and final trip he reached "the Caribbean coast of Central America" (43).

And although there were other explorers of note as well (Balboa, Ponce de Leon, Magellan, and others), Columbus is the most famous — but he is also increasingly *infamous* as increasing attention is brought to the rest of the story from an Indigenous perspective. And from an Indigenous perspective, we can hear that even beloved populist tunes like Woody Guthrie's "This Land" have an unconscious bias of Manifest Destiny for Europeans: "This land is your land / This land is my land / From California to the New York island / From the red wood forest to the Gulf Stream waters…." But if "This land was made for you and Me," then what about the people who had already been on this land for more than ten millennia (2)?

From the European perspective, the answer was to reinforce the Columbus myth with the legal "Doctrine of Discovery." The Doctrine of Discovery took the medieval worldview of the Crusades and applied it to the colonization of the Americas. In the Middle Ages, papal bulls encouraged Christians to "capture, vanquish, and subdue the...pagans, and other enemies of Christ," to "put them into perpetual slavery," and "to take all their possessions and property" — exactly what Columbus and many other European explorers continued to do centuries later in the Americas. That same Doctrine of Discovery, as initially articulated by the Roman Catholic Pope

Nicholas V (1452) and by various kings of England, was later imported into our United States legal system in conflicts over the rights to American Indian land. For example, in the 1823 Supreme Court case *Johnson v. McIntosh*:

> Writing for an unanimous court, Chief Justice John Marshall observed that Christian European nations had assumed "ultimate dominion" over the lands of America during the Age of Discovery, and that — upon "discovery" — the Indians had lost "their rights to complete sovereignty, as independent nations," and only retained a right of "occupancy" in their lands.

As recently as 2005, the United States Supreme Court explicitly referenced the Doctrine of Discovery in "City of Sherrill v. Oneida Indian Nation of New York": "Under the Doctrine of Discovery...fee title to the lands occupied by Indians when colonists arrived became vested in the sovereign — first the discovering European nation and later the original states and the United States." There is no sense of irony that the sovereignty of the Indigenous Nations is being ignored.

The U.S. Constitution does have one explicit reference to the Indigenous population of North America in Article I, Section 8: "[Congress shall have Power] to regulate Commerce with foreign Nations and among the several States, and with the Indian Tribes." (79-80). But as we have seen, the Indigenous peoples of this land were much more than tribes of hunter gatherers. They were sophisticated nations with complex cultures and established governments — and had been for millennia. And although the U.S. Constitution also says in Article VI that, "all treaties made, or which shall be made, under the Authority of the United States, shall be the supreme Law of the Land; and the Judges in every State shall be bound thereby…" (205), there is a long history of the U.S. government breaking treaties with Indigenous nations in a series of land grabs (140).

But over the years, Indigenous activists and allies have continued to demand justice. And although the Middle Passage and racist enslavement of Africans is sometimes referred to as the Original Sin of this county (and it one of them), the earlier crime was the displacement, enslavement, and slaughter of the Indigenous peoples of this land. In the words of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

> Our nation was born in genocide…. We…tried as a matter of national policy to wipe out [the] indigenous population. Moreover, we elevated that tragic experience into a noble crusade. Indeed, even today we have not permitted ourselves to reject or feel remorse for this shameful episode (78).

That word genocide is a strong one, but it is accurate: "Nearly all the Indigenous population areas of the Americas were reduced by 90 percent following the onset of colonizing projects, decreasing the targeted Indigenous populations of the Americas from one hundred million to ten million" (40). Today there are nearly three million Indigenous people living on Indigenous land, down from "fifteen million original inhabitants" in the territory known today as The United States (10).

And of the approximately 1,904 million acres in the continental U.S.,

> In 1881, Indian landholdings in the United States had plummeted to 156 million acres. By 1934, only about 50 million acres remained (an area the size of Idaho and Washington)…. During World War II, the government took 500,000 more acres for military use…. By 1955, the indigenous land base had shrunk to just 2.3 percent of its original size. (12)

Accordingly, what most Indigenous activists call for is not monetary reparations (which some racial justice activists seek), but instead the "restoration, restitution, or repatriation of lands acquired by the United States outside of valid treaties" (206).

One of the most prominent and painful examples is Mount Rushmore, which was carved into the Lakota Sioux's sacred site the *Paha Sapa*, or Black Hills. From the perspective of the standard U.S. history, the 60-foot sculptures of U.S. Presidents Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt, and Lincoln are a "Shrine of Democracy," but from an Indigenous perspective, it is a desecrating sacrilege: "a shrine of in-your-face illegal occupation and colonialism" (180). Indeed, in 1980, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled *against* the U.S. government, awarding the Sioux Nation $106 million for their stolen land. But from the perspective of the Sioux, the land was never for sale. That money remains untouched in an interest-bearing account that is currently worth more than $1.3 billion (207).

There have been some other moves toward justice. In 1970, President Richard Nixon

signed a law — “the first land restitution to any indigenous nation” — returning 48,000 acres that had been taken from the Taos Pueblo Indians (180). And most recently in late August, President Obama restored to the tallest mountain in North America, formerly Mount McKinley, its original Indigenous name of Denali.

October 12, 1992 was the quincentennial, the 500th anniversary, of Columbus landing on the shores of the Americas. To celebrate this occasion at the United Nations, both Spain and the Vatican (who historically helped develop the original Doctrine of Discovery) proposed an emphasis on “Europeans bearing the gifts of civilization and Christianity to the Indigenous peoples. Both the United States and Canada voted to support this resolution — and were shocked when the African delegation walked out in protest and returned with a statement against the colonialist proposal (197). Over time, increasing numbers of groups have begun to celebrate October 12 each year, not as Columbus Day, but as Indigenous People’s Day: a time annually for remembering an Indigenous people’s history of the United States

In this spirit, when thinking about what concluding hymn we should sing this morning on the eve of Indigenous People’s Day, a confession seemed appropriate. And perhaps the most moving confession in our hymnal is #1037. As you turn to that hymn, you’ll see that the refrain we’ll be invited to sing is “We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.” But unless we are descendants of the Indigenous People of this land, forgiveness is not ours to offer. But if we are to move forward toward justice, we must be willing to allow our hearts to break open in compassion and sorrow — and to begin again in love to together find a new way. So as we prepare to sing, I will close with these words from Willie Johns of the Brighton Seminole Reservation in Florida: “We are here to educate, not forgive. We are here to enlighten, not accuse” (1). Feeling the tension of those words with the lyrics of the hymn — and with what we are and aren’t able to forgive in various areas of our lives — let us sing together as we seek to move into the future with love.