

## **“Holding Our History”**

**Sermon by Rev. Dr. Linda A. Hart**

**November 21, 2021**

**Tahoma Unitarian Universalist Congregation**

Those of you who have been around for our new member class have had the pleasure of my romp through Unitarian and Universalist history will know that I'm a fan of our history. When I go through it, I start with Unitarianism way back in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, in Transylvania – the first place Unitarian was used – and later in England, and then jump to the US with the Pilgrims landing on Plymouth Rock. Those folks who came ashore are our religious ancestors. The Plymouth Unitarian Universalist Church claims to be the church of the Pilgrims.

Only recently I learned that the United Church of Christ church across the street from the UU church also claims to be the church of the Pilgrims, and that there has been a battle about that for decades at least.

Both do legitimately have claim to that title. What spread from Plymouth throughout New England became the standing order of churches, each village had their church on the green. Back then these

were the town churches – paid for by the taxes of the town – and if another church, say the Methodists or the Quakers, set up shop, they tended to their own needs. As the English settlers knew from England, there was the church that was the center of any town.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the established church split and the liberals became the Unitarians, and the conservatives become the Congregationalists, and eventually part of the United Church of Christ.

I also learned that for at least decades the two churches, were not on speaking terms. Each wanting to be the sole inheritor of the claim to be the church of the Pilgrims, they were in constant competition. A new minister arrived at the UU church a few years ago and walked across the street to end the feud. They now claim this history together, and I trust, in these days of reckoning with our past are finding ways to ask forgiveness and to extend some reparations to the people who they displaced 400 years ago, and who continue to bear the injuries of the invasion of the land.

It is a reckoning that we, too, must find ways to address. The Washington Post article

<<https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2021/11/04/thanksgiving->

[anniversary-wampanoag-indians-pilgrims/](#)> that Tim read from tells more of the story from the perspective of the Wampanoags. The quote from Darius Coombs that ended the reading is chilling “For us, Thanksgiving kicked off colonization,” he said. “Our lives changed dramatically. It brought disease, servitude and so many things that weren’t good for Wampanoags and other Indigenous cultures.”

The article goes on to recount the history of destruction that the Wampanoag nation faced over the subsequent centuries, a story that is familiar:

- forced to claim Christianity as their religion – pray or die, they called it;
- their land divided up into farms rather than kept as they always had as common land, and they were subject to taxes, all of it antithetical to their way of life;
- their children were taken from their families and sent to a residential school, the Carlisle school in Pennsylvania. The phrase “kill the Indian, save the man” was spoken first by the founder of that school.

It wasn't until the 1970s that they sought to recover some portion of their land. They were denied because they didn't have standing as a recognized tribe. In 2007 they received that status, and in 2015 they were given parcels of scattered land around Cape Cod that, for the federal government that constituted their reservation, a mere 1% of their actual ancestral lands. The Trump administration sought to reclaim that land from them only years later. Thankfully, they failed to do so.

When I have told the history of the Pilgrims as part of our heritage as Unitarian Universalists, I've never mentioned that those religious ancestors of ours brought plague, death and destruction to the people who lived where they landed. I've never once acknowledged the history of harm, only shared my jolly romp through our white settler past.

The Unitarian Universalist Association, our overarching denominational body, has been working to raise awareness. Our annual conference, General Assembly, in 2020 dedicated much of its programming to learning about current day Wampanoag concerns and issues, to listen to scholars and activists talk about what was needed and what the actions of our religious ancestors wrought.

The prophet Maya Angelou tells us “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”

I’ll be honest: I don’t really know what doing better looks like for us. We’ve made a start by including a land acknowledgment at the beginning of our services, and in our next budget, we need to be considering adding a line item for a significant annual gift to the Puyallup nation to acknowledge materially that we live on their land.

Some of you will remember the story I love to tell about Martin Luther King, Jr. about when he was with A. Phillip Randolph, one of the great Black men who worked to better the lives of Black folk in the mid-20th century. The two of them were at NAACP headquarters and sitting next to each other, and Randolph asked King about his work, but not in a friendly way. He wanted to know what King had actually desegregated. The NAACP had worked through legal cases to fight discrimination and segregation and had good success. King marched and talked, but what had he really done, Randolph wanted to know. “I suppose I’ve desegregated a few hearts,” King replied. Randolph was touched by that truth. “That’s all right, then,” he replied.

The similar work that those of us who are white have to do is to decolonize our hearts and minds. Decolonize our history, recognize its impact on the world, find the ways to make amends. It’s up to us to discover the ways that we can support our Indigenous family in their work to protect the land, air, and water. It is up to us, when we come to the table on Thursday, I hope surrounded by loved ones and relatives and friends, to acknowledge how broken the holiday is, how its history is our history and it holds death and destruction along with love and community. When we come to the table on Thursday, let us be sure to bring love with us. These words from Joy Harjo a member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation and our national Poet Laureate, now in her second term wrote:

I do believe love is the strongest force. It is fierce, it is what holds us together. But we are being tested. Use Thanksgiving Day as a day to ponder your heart, to remember history, and to understand that all deserve a place at the table, including Natives, the Water, the Earth--Remind yourself to be grateful even for the tests, because that is how love comes to know itself, how it grows stronger.

The ongoing work of excavating the past, and bringing the whole of it into our consciousness is hard and painful work. It's true for us as individuals reflecting on our lives, and it's true for us as people with diverse identities as we reckon with what our ancestors did and did not do, what they lived with and why they died for. It is our work of a lifetime, taken moment by moment as we awaken the complexity that is living in this world.

Let us continue on, my friends, with love and hope.