

Rev. Betsy Mead Tabor
UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes
October 13, 2019

The First Ones

PRAYER

“Eagle Poem” by Joy Harjo

To pray you open your whole self
To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
To one whole voice that is you.
And know there is more
That you can't see, can't hear;
Can't know except in moments
Steadily growing, and in languages
That aren't always sound but other
Circles of motion.
Like eagle that Sunday morning
Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky
In wind, swept our hearts clean
With sacred wings.
We see you, see ourselves and know
That we must take the utmost care
And kindness in all things.
Breathe in, knowing we are made of
All this, and breathe, knowing
We are truly blessed because we
Were born, and die soon within a
True circle of motion,
Like eagle rounding out the morning
Inside us.
We pray that it will be done
In beauty.
In beauty.

Joy Harjo is a member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation.

READING - An excerpt (adapted) from the booklet *Wild Healing* by Rev. UU Rev. Thea Nietfeld

Sometimes we need to go into the wild to heal.

Thoreau wrote: “Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations.”

To put yourself into a wild place and let it touch you begins healing. A wild place is spacious, sensual, surprising. Everything is here – earth, wind, fire water: wild space, wild mind, wild connections. These support the yearning for wholeness that is the yearning for life. Wildness is not snugly comfort. Comfort is helpful for rest, but comfort does not heal. Healing has to do with dis-comfort and the strains of expansion.

Taking in wildness renews what has atrophied or been paralyzed. Life’s adventure calls us to give and receive the energy we sometimes call love. We need wild healing when the senses have shut down and growth’s movement is blocked. Wildness expands, attention opens horizons, and if we are receptive, engages the flow of ever-circling energy. The healing time is wild, unstructured, unfocused, seemingly aimless; healing places are essential for healing time.

I woke with anxiety about the surgery scheduled for the next day. I needed something to remind me who I was... I needed to do something to help me get through the day.

As I walked in Sparrowhawk Primitive Area, what came to mind was the hymn - “Wake now my senses and hear the earth call. Feel the deep power of being in all. Keep with the web of creation your vow, giving, receiving as love shows us how.”

I sang this to myself over and over until I knew it and I had internalized it and I remembered who I was. By evening, I was ready for surgery: I knew that I was part of all that is – that I am called to hear the earth and to be conscious of my place in all life. I knew that my vow to the web of creation is to be the best I can – live the best I can with my uniquenesses...with whatever the situations in front of me offer as opportunities for giving and receiving love.

https://www.uumfe.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Honoring_Earth_Worship_Resource-9-13-13.pdf

SERMON: *The First Ones*

From my New England childhood, I remember a wildness about American Indians. Wild headdresses, wild yelling, wild stomping. As if Indians – playing Indians and wearing cowboy and Indian costumes on Halloween – were all about entertainment.

Where was our sense of respect for Indian culture? For years my family even had a running joke about Indians. My dad used to love to remember the story of when my little brother played the part of the Indian chief in the 1st grade Thanksgiving play. He only had one line but was so nervous that he delivered it with a frozen smile on his face: “Our whole tribe has been wiped out by sickness.” Dad would laugh again at the memory, the unintended humor in this little boy’s performance outweighing the horror of his line. We can display remarkable indifference to each other.

You might say my dad didn’t know any better. None of us did. Writers of history books had successfully glossed over the facts from the start. But the facts are that, just as this country’s founding fathers and mothers were importing nearly 5 million Africans to be enslaved, they were killing off twice as many Native Americans. By 1900, of the 12 million Natives estimated to have lived in this continent when the Europeans arrived, only 237,000 remained.

Today some 4.5 million people self-identify as American Indian or Alaska Native. Sobering statistics tell a story of generational trauma. About half live on reservations or other tribal areas, with incomes less than half the national average. Living conditions are rustic. About 49% graduate from high school, compared with 76% for white students. For Native Americans, the alcoholism mortality rate is 5x higher than for the general population, with only 13% of those needing substance abuse treatment receiving it. The incidence of tuberculosis for Natives is 5x the national average, twice as high for diabetes. Suicide rates are 2.5 times the national rate (twice as many women as men), and Native teens experience the highest rate of suicide of any population group in the United States.¹

But that’s not the whole story. Once upon a time, Natives on reservations lived isolated lives. Though some still do, we live in a different world. Many Natives live in over-crowded conditions, some without the amenities of electricity, plumbing or clean water, but a quick search on line indicates a surge of grassroots organizations devoted to making a difference: Running Strong for American Indian Youth, the Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute, Native American Aid, the Euchee Language Project, the Brave Heart Society, the Dakota Language Nest, the Tiwahe Foundation, American Indian Health Project, the Strong Life Suicide Prevention Project, United National Indian Tribal Youth, We R Native, and Native Hope, to mention only a handful. They are located all over the country: North Carolina, Georgia, Minnesota, Wisconsin, New Mexico, Oklahoma, the Dakotas, California, Maryland.

¹ http://www.nativepartnership.org/site/PageServer?pagename=naa_livingconditions and <http://www.ncai.org/about-tribes/demographics>

These organizations exist to heal generational trauma – by restoring a sense of identity in Native peoples, especially youth, to help them find a sense of self-worth. In schools, at storytelling festivals, through community activities, they offer programs aimed at bringing back Native languages and customs, often with elders teaching the Native language, as one school says, “breath to breath.” Teaching children their native tongues helps instill a sense of identity and belonging. Empowers them to accept and be proud of their heritage and upbringing.

One foundation, begun by tennis player Novak Djokovic, advocates language immersion programs, citing two main benefits: “1) an increasing number of Native American language speakers, which aids in saving and restoration of such ancient languages, and 2) it allows many high-risk youth from difficult backgrounds to overcome their socioeconomic circumstances and to excel.”²

Working with native youth can change a person. Take the story of a 33-year old man in Oklahoma.³ Brian was vaguely aware of some Native ancestry in his background but grew up Caucasian in a Dallas suburb. Then one day, his presence at his grandmother’s funeral caused a stir. Several elderly Native woman greeted him in amazement, hugged him, saying he was the spitting image of his great grandfather, a renowned figure in the Chickasaw Nation in the 1800s. Seeing the ancestor’s photograph felt to Brian like looking in a mirror and changed his life.

He began to study. He learned about the Trail of Tears in 1831, when the forced removal of the “Five Civilized Tribes” – Chickasaw, Choctaw, Cherokee, Creek, and Seminole – led to over 6,000 people dying of exposure, disease, and starvation. Brian’s ancestors lived. “Today,” he says, “we thrive! Thankfully the Chickasaw Nation has prospered.”

As Brian explored his roots, an unexpected job offer arrived, inviting him to move to South Dakota to work in a school of Lakota children – “as if,” he said, “the Creator gave me a sign.” he said. Drawn to the Lakota people, that tribe has become home to him. There he has found purpose: “To empower and inspire Native youth to believe and achieve in their hopes and dreams for a better quality of life, and to bring greater awareness of Native American issues.”

What once was a mild curiosity to him – some percentage of Native blood – enlivens him today, a source of identity and pride.

I heard another generation’s story of Native pride last year when visiting our daughter in Albuquerque. The city museum showed a video of elderly WWII vets, Native Americans who remembered being taken from their homes as children, forced to leave their families and customs, change their hair and clothing, and speak only English. Then, as young men, they were recruited into the war effort.

During the war, their upbringing became an asset. A call went out for people who could speak Navajo, and these soldiers became “code talkers,” operatives who sent and received radio

² <https://novakdjokovicfoundation.org/importance-children-learning-native-languages/>

³ <https://blog.nativehope.org/two-worlds-one-journey>

messages between the front lines and command centers, in what became known as an unbreakable code during the war.

Here's the heartbreak. Aware of and deeply proud of their significant contributions to the war effort, these men were not allowed to say a word to anyone about this, even family, for twenty-two years. How ironic to be denied most of their adult lives the chance to voice their accomplishment and pride – and, once again, be made to minimize their Navajo identity. In this video, finally out in the open, you can feel their joy at being able to reveal the truth.

Today, we are hearing Native voices across the generations. Joy Harjo, the woman whose prayer we just heard, is an activist for Native American rights and feminism. This year, at 68, she was named the United States Poet Laureate, the first Native to be so honored. “I feel strongly,” she says, “that I have a responsibility to all the sources that I am: to all past and future ancestors, to my home country, to all places that I touch down on and that are myself, to all voices, all women, all of my tribe, all people, all earth, and beyond that to all beginnings and endings.”⁴ On becoming the Poet Laureate, she told the NYT: “My poems are about confronting the kind of society that would diminish Native people, disappear us from the story of this country.”⁵

One more story, of a young Native voice in the news today, Mariana Harvey. Pregnant this past January with her first child, she accepted an Inspired Natives award. Harvey is an enrolled member of the Yakama nation. She became an activist for Native rights in high school, watching her older sister advocate for changing the school “Indian” mascot, which then led to the Seattle public school system’s banning all Indian mascots. “This,” says Harvey, “is what determined my path, I knew from then on that I wanted to make positive impacts and create change.”⁶

She sings, and in a moment, we’ll hear her – Shana found an Indigenous People’s Day song on line, performed by her and her partner, Native Itsa Shash, a peaceful lake their backdrop. This music may not be easy to listen to. At first listening, it did seem loud to me, high, perhaps too “wild” for a worship service.

We might consider, before listening, aspects of Native culture which do resonate deeply with us. Which don’t feel “wild” at all. Prayers, for instance, that have become famous. Beloved, even. Think of Chief Seattle: “We are all connected. What we do to the earth we do to ourselves....” Think of the Apache wedding blessing: “Now you will feel no rain, for each of you will be shelter for the other. Now you will feel no cold, for each of you will be warmth to the other....” Think of the Navajo Indian chant: “The mountains, I become part of it. The herbs, the fir tree, I become part of it. The morning mists, the clouds, the gathering waters, I become part of it. The wilderness, the dew drops, the pollen . . . I become part of it.”

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joy_Harjo

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/19/books/joy-harjo-poet-laureate.html>

⁶ <https://eighthgeneration.com/blogs/blog/2018-inspired-natives-award>

Native music, on the other hand, may resonate less. It may challenge some of us. Can we go there for a moment? Think of the music of the African American opera, *Porgy and Bess*: “It’s summertime and the living is easy....” and “Bess, you is my woman now....” We sing along, but is this African American music, this classic written by two Jewish guys from Brooklyn? We here at UUFES do sing songs that are African-American for sure – songs in our hymnal – but might wonder to what extent have they been adapted to sound appealing to the white European ear....

What won me over about young Mariana Harvey’s song were the English words: “Today is for us indigenous people. Rise up, sing loud, celebrate and be proud.” Listen for the passion in their voices. Listen: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ynHNQrQT4fc&app=desktop>

When we open our hearts, differences begin to dissolve. We can hear in Native music the beauty, the authenticity, the DNA of what might once have sounded “wild.” It *is* wild: Native music has an untouched quality, an originality tied not to the history of western civilization but inextricably to the land and to a cultural past that has survived, almost inconceivably, despite devastating loss. We’re not *imagining* its wildness. Shouting out in prayer to the Great Spirit is different, indeed, from reading updates of illuminated manuscripts created centuries ago by sequestered monks and the like.

This weekend, we celebrate the resurgence of Native language and song – wild and loud and proud and alive, thanks not to scholars or oppressors, but to the voices of grand and great-grand mothers and fathers.

In celebrating, can we also open ourselves a bit more to each other’s truth? Remember that scene, that clash of cultures in front of the Lincoln Memorial last winter? The Native man, singing at full voice, and the boys, maybe stunned or uncomfortable with this display, some looking to each other for guidance, others (but not all) finding relief in mockery? Imagine wildness like that, in your face. It’s discomfiting enough to listen to a recording.

Unlike the enormous enslaved population whose languages and customs were snuffed, stamped out, eradicated by white settlers, the tiny population of Natives who survived America’s genocide has miraculously held onto enough of their ancestry to build on it today. That building is happening all over this country. Yes, much was lost, but *enough* survived, passed along, breath to breath, from grandparent to child, enough to give us reason to celebrate this day.

So may it be.

Postlude

Our postlude is a recording by Buffy Sainte-Marie. She was born in 1941 on the Piapot Plains Cree First Nation Reserve in Saskatchewan, Canada. Abandoned as an infant, she was adopted by Albert and Winifred Sainte-Marie, a Wakefield, Massachusetts couple of Mi’kmaq descent.

<https://www.google.com/search?q=Buffy+Ste.+Marie+oh+beautiful&oq=Buffy+Ste.+Marie+oh+beautiful&aqs=chrome..69i57.6591j1j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>