

***Our Heritage as Peacemakers:  
Lessons from Tribal ‘Truth and Reconciliation’***

13 October 2013

Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Reston  
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**The Monthly Worship Theme is “Forgiveness”**

*A few summers ago I was part of a History Retreat at our Unitarian Universalist Camp at Ferry Beach on the coast of Maine. Our subject was peacemaking. Modern Unitarian Universalism enjoys a long and proud history of peacemakers. At our retreat, we were moved by the power of a ‘Truth and Reconciliation’ process in a case study from the Wabanaki tribe of native Americans and the state of Maine. This story of working for peace among original nations has lessons for all of us about the power of forgiveness and reconciliation.*

**READING: “Forgiveness” by Sara Moores Campbell**

There is incredible power in forgiveness. But forgiveness is not rational. One can seldom find a reason to forgive or be forgiven. Forgiveness is often undeserved. It may require a dimension of justice (penance, in traditional terms), but not always, for what it holds sacred is not fairness, but self-respect and community. Forgiveness does not wipe away guilt, but invites reconciliation. And it is an important to be able to forgive as it is to be forgiven.

No, we do not forgive and forget. But when we invite the power of forgiveness, we release ourselves from some of the destructive hold the past has on us. Our hatred, our anger, our need to feel wronged--those will destroy us, whether a relationship is reconciled or not. ... But we cannot just will ourselves to enter into forgiveness, either as givers or receivers. We can know it is right and that we want to do it and still not be able to.

We can, however, be open and receptive to the power of forgiveness, which, like any gift of the spirit, isn't of our own making. Its power is rooted in love. The Greek word for this kind of love is *agape*. Martin Luther King, Jr., defined *agape* as ‘love seeking to presence and create community.’ This kind of love is human, but it is also the grace of a transcendent power that lifts us out of ourselves. It transforms and heals; and even when we are separated by time or space or death, it reconciles us to ourselves and to Life. For its power abides not just between us but within us. If we invited the power of *agape* to heal our personal wounds and give us the gift of forgiveness, we would give our world a better chance of survival.

**SERMON: “Our Heritage as Peacemakers: Lessons from Tribal ‘Truth and Reconciliation’”**

I think it's important that we religious professionals inform our congregations about what we do when we attend professional meetings, so you don't think we're just lying next to a pool at some

luxury hotel or taking a cruise to far-off lands. A few summers ago I spent a week of professional development time at Ferry Beach, the Unitarian Universalist camp on the southern coast of Maine that some of you have visited. Ferry Beach runs weeklong summer programs which address a variety of topics. I was the coordinator of Heritage Week, a retreat devoted to Unitarian Universalist history. I learned much that week: this sermon resulted from several lessons I learned at Ferry Beach, lessons which inform our October worship theme of “Forgiveness.”

The theme for Heritage Week was “peacemaking.” We studied Unitarian and Universalist peacemakers in our history. That there have been many Unitarian Universalists standing on the side of peace is not surprising: peace goes hand in hand with liberal religious identity. I thought that peace seemed like a good theme to pursue. Then, when my history colleague, Harvard Prof. Dan McKanan, agreed to lead the seminar, to offer his personal expertise on peacemaking, I knew we had a winner of a topic. And win we did. What a week: one of the more moving “lessons” was about a process for peacemaking known as “Truth and Reconciliation” and how that process leads to forgiveness.

### The Context for Peace

First let’s consider peace: peace-making among religious liberals and peace in American culture generally. What is the status of peace-making these days? Do we discuss peace enough? We hear about peace talks in the Middle East, or the end of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. But is peace currently as critical a topic as jobs or the environment or race relations? Peace does not seem to be on the lips of as many folks as it was in the ‘60s, when leading vocal groups rallied to “give peace a chance.” Perhaps we citizens of the 21<sup>st</sup> century need to rekindle this activism for peace, for peace and forgiveness go hand in hand.

Today, when you think of peacemaking, what comes to mind? Is it peace from terrorists, such as wreaked havoc on the United States on 9-11? Is it peace from war: from particular wars; from all war? Is it peace with other people, or peace among political candidates, or peace in the government? Do we hope for peace among people of different religious orientations, or perhaps peace within our own religious denomination, or peace in this congregation? Do we seek peace within our families, peace within ourselves? Echoing the words of our responsive reading by Lao Tse, peace exists in an interconnected web, and peace starts within the heart of each of us.

You have probably heard stories about torturers or murderers or terrorists who were abused as children and how these childhood experiences help explain their aggression as adults. Just as peace starts in the heart, so it seems does abuse. We humans pass on to others ways of interacting that we learned from others, perhaps as early as childhood. I take comfort in knowing that one of the influences on my current life is the dual heritage of Unitarianism and Universalism, both traditions having included many peacemakers. Modern Unitarian Universalists have peace in our ‘system’ and we can call on our heritage of peace to inform how we are together with one another today.

### Unitarian Universalist Peacemakers in history

During that retreat on peacemaking at Ferry Beach, we learned about many noble people and noble causes: I could easily spend the rest of this sermon telling you about them and still would not cover everyone. We learned about Universalists instrumental in defining the government of

the new country in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. We studied Unitarians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who built intentional communities such as Hopedale in Massachusetts or who supported abolition and non-violent resistance to oppression a century before Martin Luther King. We studied war-resisters, especially Unitarian Universalists against the Vietnam War, a stance which generated controversies which rocked the foundations of many congregations.

Let me tell you more about just one of the peacemakers we studied. Benjamin Rush was a signer of the Declaration of Independence. A Philadelphia doctor and scientist, he was also a friend of both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson and he founded Dickinson College in Pennsylvania. In 1790, he helped write one of the first statements which defined the nature of the new denomination of Universalism, its "Articles of Religion." Rush was interested in a fundamental question of governing: can peace be legislated? Is peace the work of the government, or should peace-making be left to religious institutions, or to some other body? If the American government runs a War Department, argued Rush, then why not also establish a Peace Department? In 1798 he published a 'Plan of a Peace-Office for the United States.' "It is to be hoped that no objection will be made to the establishment of such an office, while we are engaged in a war with the Indians, for as the *War-Office* of the United States was established in time of peace, it is equally reasonable that a *Peace-Office* should be established in the time of war." He suggested that to help emphasize the difference between the offices for Peace and War, above the door of the War Office there be inscriptions that the War Office is a "Widow-and-Orphan-making office," "An office for creating famine," and "An office for butchering the Human Species." I really appreciate all of Rush's recommendations except for his idea that a group of young ladies in white robes assemble every day to sing odes, hymns, and anthems in praise of peace..... Not quite sure if he meant this tongue-in-cheek or not.

### 2010 Statement of Conscience

In keeping with Unitarian and Universalist's awesome history of peacemaking, it seems natural that the Unitarian Universalist Association chose 'Creating Peace' as a recent Statement of Conscience. Every four years, this denomination takes a stand for a social justice statement position. This statement is used in part to represent Unitarian Universalist leaders and principles to religious leaders in other denominations and other countries. Any proposal becomes a Statement of Conscience after four or five years of study as a Social Action Initiative. 'Peace' was first proposed around 2006, and officially adopted in 2011. The statement addresses peace in our world, peace in our society, peace in our congregations, peace in our personal relationship, and peace within ourselves.

I'd like to read a short excerpt from this Statement: the entire statement is on the UUA website. **We believe all people share a moral responsibility to create peace. Mindful of both our rich heritage and our past failures to prevent war, and enriched by our present diversity of experience and perspective, we commit ourselves to a radically inclusive and transformative approach to peace.....**

**Our faith calls us to create peace, yet we confess that we have not done all we could to prevent the spread of armed conflict throughout the world. At times we have lacked the courage to speak and act against violence and injustice; at times we have lacked the creativity to speak and act in constructive ways; at times we have condemned the violence**

**of others without acknowledging our own complicity in violence. We affirm a responsibility to speak truth to power, especially when unjust power is exercised by our own nation. Too often we have allowed our disagreements to distract us from all that we can do together. This Statement of Conscience challenges individual Unitarian Universalists, as well as our congregations and Association to engage with more depth, persistence and creativity in the complex task of creating peace.**

I encourage everyone to read the full Statement of Conscience and ask, how does this statement inform peacemaking right here at home?

#### Peacemaking as Restorative justice: Truth and Reconciliation

One particular approach to peacemaking is known as ‘Truth and Reconciliation.’ Many of you may have heard about this program in South Africa, as in the post-apartheid work of Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

“Truth and Reconciliation” contrasts with traditional attitudes toward justice-making, which often include punishment and retribution toward those committing offenses. Rather than retribution, Truth and Reconciliation is based on restorative justice. Embracing forgiveness as part of its process, restorative justice focuses on the healing of relationships between victims, their offenders, and a community. A restorative approach helps us move forward together, as we work to restore wholeness to that which had been broken. Restorative work can happen at all those levels of peace-making that Lao-Tse called us to: from the family to the nation.

Complementing its external work on peacemaking, the Unitarian Universalist Association recently adopted several of its own resolutions on Truth and Reconciliation. For example, in 2007, the national President, Rev. William Sinkford, issued a call to begin the work of uncovering our own part in oppression against others. He called us to consider links with the genocide of native Americans; or with the perpetuation of slavery --- there were plenty of Unitarians and Universalists, such as Thomas Jefferson, who became wealthy off slavery. In 2009 Rev. Sinkford engaged in another act of Truth and Reconciliation before four thousand delegates at General Assembly in Salt Lake City. Sinkford reminded the Assembly about the American Unitarian Association’s involvement with government agencies in actions against the Ute Indians in the late nineteenth century. Right there from the General Assembly podium Sinkford offered a formal apology to the Ute nation for past crimes and asked for forgiveness. A representative of the Ute Nation accepted his apology. It was a powerful moment of peace-making.

Think back in your own life: have you been present when hurtful actions among people were owned up to, and apologies offered, and forgiveness given? What was that like? Such events can be powerful experiences.

#### A “Truth and Reconciliation” Story from Ferry Beach

Back to Ferry Beach. At our peacemaking retreat, we heard many stories about peacemaking in our history. Then we had a guest speaker who told us her amazing story about recent peacemaking in the state of Maine. Denise Altvater, a member of the Wabanaki Nation of Native Americans in Maine, told her powerful story of creating her own Truth and Reconciliation program. Since that summer at Ferry Beach, I have heard Denise interviewed on national radio programs and seen her

in other media. Her story had a positive impact on many lives.

The Wabanaki are one of the many native American groups deserving of Truth and Reconciliation. It is no coincidence that I programmed this sermon today on Columbus Day weekend: the Wabanaki's story is just one of many which remind us to re-assess just what we honor about this holiday. The Wabanaki are native to the state of Maine. In the fifteenth century, there were over 32,000 members in twenty tribes. Today they number only four tribes. In the late nineteenth century, the United States attempted to solve 'the Indian problem' through assimilation in actions like removing native children from their families to foster homes. In Maine native children were nineteen times more likely be placed in foster homes as were white children: the government totally missed the point about the importance of tribal culture. Not until 1978 was there an Indian Child Welfare Act to protect native children and their families. But still, to this day, Wabanaki children are subject to discrimination and abuse at the hands of government agencies.

Our visitor Denise knew about abuse. When she was eight, she and her five sisters were removed from their home and put into foster care. Denise wept as she told us her story: how they were suddenly routed out one morning, given garbage bags to pack their clothing in, loaded into a car, and driven away. Two of her sisters died from complications related to this abuse. Somehow Denise survived: she survived physical abuse, sexual abuse, alcoholism, her own early pregnancies, and a rocky marriage. She wept, and we wept with her as she told her story.

Then about twelve years ago, motivated by her passion for restorative justice, she started to work for American Friends Service Committee in Cambridge, MA, and got involved in Truth and Reconciliation work. Her professional work for justice somehow prompted her brain to recall her own stories of harassment and abuse, and she wanted to tell these stories. She found it helpful to talk about them, so to process the hurts and move forward. At first privately, then gradually to more and more people, at higher levels of state government, she told her story. Denise is a woman with drive: one of her appearances of storytelling caught the ear of the governor of Maine, which enabled Denise to launch the first Truth and Reconciliation program in the nation between a native people and a state government. Through demonstrating openness and honesty, other Wabanaki started coming forward to tell their stories. Since that visit from Denise, I have heard reports about similar programs in other native communities. The stories are helping bring about change, so to move toward reconciliation and healing. Telling their stories felt risky at first, but Denise came to realize it was the only way that she and her people could move forward into healthier relationships. Through Denise's work, her people have also helped received some financial reparations and there have been reforms within abusive governmental programs.

Denise Altvater admitted that the telling of personal stories is risky. The tellers risk opening up old hurts. Still, the benefits are well worth it. Risking and talking lead to healing and wholeness. It started with one voice---the childhood voice of one woman. From one voice, healing has come to thousands.

#### Moving Forward with "Truth and Reconciliation"

Knowing our histories and being able to talk about our history is important. And being willing to talk about all facets of that history: the positives, the peacemakers, the saints; as well as the hurts,

the oppressors, the sinners. Yes, telling our stories can be risky and leave us vulnerable, but as Denise Altvater demonstrated, and as so many of our brothers and sisters in our liberal religious history have shown us, through the telling and the risking and the crying, we can find ways to go forward, bringing with us the potential to change the world. Through the telling of stories, Denise learned ways to move past the victimhood which the past claim on her, to become a leader in justice-making.

Our histories matter. As Denise Altvater learned, telling stories can change lives. Finding safe places to tell our stories is important. One activity of our interim work together this year will include what we call a History Wall, a workshop during which you will have an opportunity together to reflect on your memories and associations with this congregation and what your experiences in this congregation mean to you. I am still planning the schedule, but I expect we will schedule this History Wall workshop in December or January. Our first project will be a conversation about shared values in this congregation, the grounding conversation for several other transitioning projects.

As we name and own our stories, forgiveness and reconciliation opens doors to Truth and Reconciliation. Through forgiveness and reconciliation we find the wholeness of Beloved Community. Through forgiveness and reconciliation we move forward toward peace.

MAY ALL THIS BE SO

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