

Journey Toward Wholeness

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Today, we thank and acknowledge the First Nations of the territories where we live and are meeting: the Anishinaabe Mississauga, Seneca, Huron-Wendat, and other peoples whose ancestors lived here.

The land claim of the Mississaugas of the New Credit, relating to the Crown's 1805 acquisition of land running from Ashbridge's Bay westward to the mouth of the Credit River, and extending 40 kilometres northwards, is still under negotiation.

Toronto owes its location and earliest traditions as a meeting place to the indigenous peoples who developed sustainable ways of living and welcomed settlers here.

We recognize that the treatment of indigenous peoples is an ongoing social justice issue that is intertwined in many ways with the economic, political, and social systems that have brought us to this place and time.

I, like many of you, have heard such acknowledgements of the land before.

Recently, at an event at Emmanuel College, I was struck—and I was heartened—to hear the speaker say that though she's read such words many times, she's still struggling to understand what they actually mean.

That's true for me.

I think it's true for many of us.

I think it is true for us as a country.

We're still struggling to understand what it means
to acknowledge centuries of behaviour that have so often left the
indigenous peoples of this land decimated and devastated.

We are struggling to understand what it means to make things right,
to make the best that can be made of a history marked with heartache.

Though we who are settlers on this land aren't directly responsible
for the actions of our ancestors, we do bear a responsibility
for dealing with the burden they have left to us.

And so it falls to all of us in this country, at this moment in time,
to try, once again, and hopefully once and for all,
to get this right—
to bring deep integrity to our relationship
with our indigenous neighbours,
and ultimately to the integrity of Canada, as we seek
to live in harmony with the multiple nations that call this land home.

In the years since I moved here, I have endeavoured
some would say with the zeal of a convert,
to study and learn Canada's rich history.

And the longer I'm here, the more I'm coming to accept
that that brings with it a responsibility
to understand and to own that history—
and to work to write a new and more hopeful chapter
in this long and complicated story.

Across the years, I've learned about
The Numbered Treaties, The Indian Act, and The Royal Commission.

I've taken in, as best I can, the lessons from Oka
and of failure of The Meech Lake Accords.

Like many of you, my heart was broken open by stories out of Attawapiskat,
and KI, and so many other reserves across the country.

And yet my heart has been stirred by it all, as well.

Stirred with a hope that we may be reaching another defining moment
in our history when we can make a significant stride
toward becoming the people and the country we aspire to be.

That step toward a fairer future, though,
will require a greater reckoning with the realities of our history.

It will mean more and more people truly coming to terms
with the pain of the past—and with the ways that pain
remains an intensely felt part of our present.

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Last Wednesday night, out at our Mississauga congregation,
I took part in what's called "The Blanket Exercise,"
an interactive workshop created by Kairos,
the ecumenical Christian social justice organization.

I had read about it beforehand.

I knew it was a participatory exercise to walk a group through the complicated
history between the indigenous peoples
and the settlers of what we—we settlers—call Canada.

And I had heard it was powerful, though I must now say
I didn't fully comprehend just how powerful it would be.

Upon entering the room, where blankets have been spread out across the floor,
all overlapping, we took off our shoes in anticipation.

When the facilitator invited us to stand on the blankets,
we were told we were standing on the back of Turtle Island,
the great land mass of North America.

We were told we were the indigenous peoples of this land.
And that our numbers rivaled the population of Europe.

All was well at the start, of course.
Without overly romanticizing this situation, things were pretty good.

But things, obviously enough, changed

when the first settler ship pulled up to the dock.

As the exercise unfolds, land is bought and sold,
treaties are made and broken,
disease and violence wipe out vast swaths of the native population.

All the while, our share of Turtle Island was shrinking—
quite literally, as the facilitators walk around the room
scrunching up the corners of our blankets, and then folding them into small
squares, where a few of us teeter tottered as we tried to keep our balance.

As the exercise went on, more and more of us
were killed off and sent to our seats.

The few who remained were crowded on to the blankets
that symbolized the 1/10th of 1% of Turtle Island
that remains in native hands today.

It's a challenging story to take in—
a dramatic tableau that puts each person directly into the story.

It's little wonder that voices cracked and people cried
as we stood there in our socks with the history of this country
in a tangle of blankets at our feet.

What struck me was that none of the history I learned that night
was new to me—or I suspect for anyone there.

We were told what we already knew—at least what we thought we knew—
but in a new and visceral way.

We were just standing around on blankets and hearing a recitation of the sins
of the past, but somehow it was present and real and relevant.

It's certain there was a range of emotions at work in the room.

What was most powerful, though,
was having the facilitator explain at the end
that it wouldn't be helpful, that it wouldn't even be productive,
if guilt were to be the emotion that dominated or displaced the others.

The exercise was an invitation to symbolically stand in our messy history and be left wondering where the next steps might lead, wondering where the path of hope and healing might lie.

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As we come to terms with our history, one incredibly important step on that path involves revisiting the assumptions carried by so many of our ancestors to this place.

Many of those assumptions—the remnants of which linger in many North American minds to this day—were first given expression by Pope Alexander VI on May 4, 1493.

In a Papal Bull, the pope blessed the Spanish conquest of all lands a hundred leagues west of the Azores, empowering Spain, and then many European powers that would follow, with the right to “discover” any land they stumbled across that wasn’t already populated by Christians.

It was theirs, according to the pope, finders keepers.

And it was theirs to use as they saw fit. They were given *carte blanche* to exploit the land.

They were to care for the “health of [the] souls” they found there, but encouraged to overthrow any barbarous nations they came across, while seeking to bring those souls to the Christian faith.

Despite petitions and pleas in recent years to repudiate or at least revoke “The Doctrine of Discovery,” it remains on the books to this day.

This Papal Bull was used for centuries to justify the expropriation of indigenous people’s lands—even by people who completely rejected any and all papal authority.

More than a doctrine, it was an idea that captured the imaginations of wave after wave of settlers who came to these shores.

It wasn’t all that hard to convince our forebears—

at least the ones who came centuries ago—
that what they found here was theirs for the taking.

And while it would be comforting to think this all a thing of the past,
this insidious notion lives on today.

You see it still at work when treaties are disregarded
and drilling or mining begins without the blessing of the local population.

And you hear it echoed in the hateful comments
found at the bottom of most any online column about indigenous issues.

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Maybe you've seen this particular post on Facebook
or heard a similar telling of the story.

A woman is standing in line at a store in Santa Fe, New Mexico,
talking on her phone in a language unknown to the white guy in front of her.

He eventually says, maybe even trying to be helpful..., I don't know,
"I didn't want to say anything while you were on the phone,
but you're in America now. You need to speak English."

The woman, confused, recoils and responds, "Excuse me?"

And then the man, speaking as slowly as he could
so the woman might understand, said,
"If you want to speak Mexican, go back to Mexico.
In America, we speak English."

And that's when she said, "Sir, I was speaking Navajo.
If you want to speak English, go back to England."

It's stunning at times the degree to which people don't get it.

I find it ironic that the term nativist
is used to describe people who wish to exclude immigrants,
people who want to deny additional immigrants
the safety, rights, and opportunities they themselves have found.

And never, to my knowledge, do these people identify as indigenous!

So I find it doubly ironic (if such a thing is possible) that those who express such nativist views almost certainly never mean to include, well, actual native peoples in their calculations of what is fair and right, and good.

Since the horrible violence in Paris Friday night, these voices have united in choruses heard here and there that argue against European and North American countries welcoming in Syrian refugees—with seemingly no appreciation for the fact that it is violence of this very sort that these people are seeking to flee in the first place.

We, who are so fortunate to live in Canada at this point in history, stand in the middle of a complicated story with a large cast of characters who go by the names of indigenous, aboriginal, native, Metis, settler, immigrant, and refugee.

That story is still unfolding in both directions—into a past we are finally coming to grasp more deeply, and into a future we can scarcely see.

I believe our ability to understand and heal the past will greatly shape our ability to live into a story that brings forth the best qualities of everyone who calls Canada home.

When the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established, in 2008, to make real the apology Prime Minister Harper offered in the House of Commons for the terrible harm caused by residential schools, the possibility of a new and promising chapter was opened.

That Commission's final report was presented to the country last June.

In a series of strong recommendations, it sets forth what the path to healing in this country looks like.

It outlines the work to be undertaken by government at all levels to improve child welfare, education, and health care, to protect indigenous languages and culture, and ensure genuine justice and reconciliation for and with native communities.

I want to share with you a passage from the report,
which I hear as an invitation.

Reconciliation is in the best interests of all of Canada.
It is necessary not only to resolve the ongoing conflicts
between Aboriginal peoples and institutions of the country,
but also in order for Canada to remove a stain from its past
and be able to maintain its claim to be a leader
in the protection of human rights among the nations of the world.

Canada's historical development,
as well as the view held strongly by some that the history of that
development is accurate and beneficent, raises significant barriers
to reconciliation in the twenty-first century.

No Canadian can take pride in this country's treatment
of Aboriginal peoples, and, for that reason,
all Canadians have a critical role to play in advancing reconciliation in
ways that honour and revitalize the nation-to-nation Treaty relationship.

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This afternoon, our congregation's Aboriginal Awareness Group
will take us through a fuller exploration of what the Final Report
and its recommendations entail.

The report, if implemented, would bring significant changes to this country,
and it would, at long last, bring the gift of healing.

I hope many of you will take part in this conversation.
I hope you will have your heart and minds challenged, as I have had mine, and
I hope we might, together, begin to consider what it would mean
for us, as Unitarians, to take up the work of becoming a Reconciling
Congregation.

To be a faith community committed to helping to bring about this healing—
in the hearts of us all, for everyone across this land,
and for the greater good that Canada can be in the wider world.

So may it be. Amen.