

# Land Acknowledgement

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Each week, at least for the past several years,  
we at First Unitarian have started every worship service,  
every congregational meeting, and every board meeting  
by acknowledging the land on which we gather.

It is a traditional indigenous ritual,  
whenever arriving some place,  
to honour the people of that place by acknowledging the creator  
and the local people who call that place home.

It has also, of course, become these days  
accepted if not expected practice  
at least among gatherings of progressive people  
who profess a desire to work towards reconciliation.

That is not to say, however,  
that these rituals are without their complications.

In the five years we have been offering such land acknowledgements here at First,  
the staff and I have gotten a fair bit feedback that runs the gamut.

Some feel the land acknowledgements are too short,  
others say they are too long.

Some find them overly preachy,  
and some lament that they don't have more bite.

One of the challenges that we have  
in contrast to many other groups upholding this practice  
is that we have the burden of doing it week after week,  
to a roughly consistent audience.

It is hard to keep it fresh,  
and to make it interesting with an economy of words.

And I have often wondered if our boredom with it or our frustration with it  
is actually the thing we most need to sit with.

To confront our discomfort,  
especially those of us counted as settlers in this land.

I'm deeply grateful to Chief Peters for being with us this morning.

His words call to, us with the deep teaching  
that we are in relationship with the earth,  
that we must hold all our relations,  
knowing that our connections extend beyond  
our immediate circle of family and friends  
to include the great web of life, to every living creature.

But, with all due respect to Chief Peters,  
I'm remembering this morning  
the most impactful land acknowledgment I've ever heard.

It was some years back.

I was in St. Louis, attending the annual Unitarian Universalist General Assembly.

It was the opening ceremony of a days-long extravaganza  
that's something like the CNE of Unitarian Universalism.

Thousands were gathered in the convention hall from across North America.

And when it came time for the land acknowledgement,  
the emcee for the evening had to explain  
that the arrangements that had carefully been put into place for this occasion  
had not worked out as planned.

He then read a letter from the regional chief who had been invited to speak.

In the letter, the chief explained that she lived a four-hour drive away.

And then she listed the challenges her people were contending with  
under the ongoing strains of colonialism.

She said she was choosing to not attend that night,  
because she thought the better use of her time and energy  
would be to stay on her reserve and serve her people.

She wished us well and said she hoped we enjoyed our conference.

But she also said that it wasn't her job to make several thousand settlers

in the lands of her people feel better about our being there.

There really wasn't much of a need for a sermon or anything else in that ceremony.

The chief's absence was her sermon,  
it was her land acknowledgement.

There wasn't really anything more to be said—  
that is, if words or thoughts and prayers  
were all we were prepared to offer in response.

Though it's been almost twenty years since that night,  
I've never forgotten the lesson from that great teacher.

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Last month, Bob and I made a trip to New England  
so that I could fulfill a promise made long ago  
to officiate the wedding of our beloved niece.

While in the Boston area, we visited parts of the region  
where my ancestors had once lived.

Ancestors who founded the colonies—or, better,  
the cities now known as Plymouth, Salem, and Boston.

One of my pandemic projects has been delving deeper  
into my family's genealogy.

I've definitely expanded upon what I previously knew,  
and I've been able to confirm much of what  
had been passed down as the lore of my family.

It's basically clergy all the way back to the beginning of the Reformation.

I am descended from a long line of ministers,  
including those stern and steely Puritans  
who founded New England in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

But, of course, they did more than establish the lovely coastal towns  
that endure to this day.

After a very short peace with the Wampanoag and Massachusett  
people they displaced, they engaged

in the violent conquest of the Indigenous peoples of that place,  
culminating a couple of generations later in what is called King Phillip's War.

This may feel like ancient history.

But as William Faulkner memorably put it in his novel, *Requiem for a Nun*,  
“The past is never dead. It's not even past.”

In short order, my blood ancestors—  
and the spiritual ancestors of modern-day Unitarian Universalism—  
decimated the peoples who had called that land home for thousands of years.

These ancestors felt called by God, authorized by scripture,  
empowered by King James and King Charles,  
and financed by wealthy investors in London  
to build their city on a hill,  
a bastion of religious freedom.

In truth, the freedom they were seeking  
was the freedom to be far, far away from people who held  
different theological and social views from theirs.

And before long, with the conflict with the Indigenous peoples in check,  
they got on with building their New Jerusalem in the forests of New England.

The more digging I've done into my family history, the harder it's gotten.

I've learned that my eighth great-grandfather  
was the first headmaster of the “Indian School” in Virginia,  
founded in conjunction with the creation of the College of William & Mary.

I've learned that my twelfth great-grandfather,  
this one on the second boat to Jamestown,  
was killed in 1623 by the Paspahugh,  
in retaliation for his having killed their chief some ten years before.

Perhaps those of you who are settlers  
have a family history with similar ghosts, known or unknown.

Or perhaps the story of your arrival on these shores is very different.

Even so, whatever our particular history,  
we who are here now continue to enjoy the benefits  
that come from the legacy of what people like my ancestors did

as some of the first settlers of this continent.

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While Bob and I were in New England a few weeks ago, we visited Plimoth Plantation, the recreated Pilgrim village set up in modern-day Plymouth to give tourists and American schoolchildren a sanitized taste of what colonial life was like.

To the site's credit, part of this strange, colonial theme park includes a recreated Wampanoag village, with modern-day Wampanoag, in costume and there to interpret their settlement alongside the present-day actors who are dressed up as Pilgrims, with 17th century costumes and strange British accents.

I felt profoundly uncomfortable with almost every aspect of this place.

On one hand, it felt like the Wampanoag were weird actors in this surreal colonial Disneyland.

Or worse, like the indigenous peoples brought from various places on earth and displayed at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, as though they were less than human.

But their presence there that day was profoundly impactful for me.

For all of the land acknowledgements I had read, for all the gestures I've made on the path to reconciliation, suddenly, there, in Plymouth, what had been abstract and theoretical became concrete and tangible.

My ancestors had displaced and devastated, to be generous, the ancestors of the very people before me, on the very land where we stood.

I imagine that I will be wrestling with this fact for the rest of my life.

Ultimately, I'm grateful for having had this experience, as it makes the work before me clearer, and personal.

It must be said that the call to truth and reconciliation has both an inner and an outer dimension.

There are outward actions that matter.

The TRC's calls to meaningful action  
offer a framework for finding our way forward,  
for trying to repair and right four centuries of wrong.

But for the outward actions to truly be transformative,  
there is inner work that we who are settlers must undertake.

A couple of weeks ago at the reclaiming the land ceremony  
for the new home of the Thunder Woman Healing Lodge,  
Patti Pettigrew, the Executive Director of the lodge,  
reminded us gathered there  
that the settlers of this country at so many points along the way  
treated the Indigenous peoples as less than human.

That point has stayed with me.

As well as the fact that the denial of another person's dignity  
has always been a crucial step to any genocide.

Hannah Arendt, the political theorist  
who wrote extensively about the Holocaust,  
spoke of the banality of evil.

How average people can become engaged in truly evil behaviour  
by slowly forgetting or failing to see, altogether,  
the humanity of another person.

This summer, we unearthed the sins of Canada in a new way,  
as the unmarked graves of some 1000 children were found—  
graves that Indigenous peoples have been saying for decades were there.

These unmarked graves—  
the ones found and those yet to be discovered—  
are the shame of Canada.

And I believe all of us know and feel this.

As uncomfortable as it is, this is the history of this land.

And it must be acknowledged.

To acknowledge the land means to acknowledge the history of the land,  
and see the consequences of that history in the present,  
and to respond to the demands for justice going forward.

While we cannot change the devastations of the past,  
what we do in the present and the future matters—  
for there is the possibility of adding a next chapter to this story  
that speaks of repair and healing, of justice and true equality.

As we approach this first National Day for Truth & Reconciliation,  
may we grapple with what it means to hold this history,  
with all of its complications.

But may we also dedicate ourselves to the inner, spiritual work required  
to behold the sacred spark of life that inhabits every person on this planet,  
beginning with the Indigenous Peoples of this place.

So may it be.