

“This land is whose land?”

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“This soil and the air space extending above it
shall not be a part of any nation
and shall not be subject to any entity’s jurisdiction.”

Such are the words that I found engraved on a bronze medallion embedded into the ground that marked the center of the plaza that I had been searching for. It was a crisp December morning not quite 14 years ago. I had travelled from New York City to Berkeley, California to meet with our Unitarian Universalist Association’s Ministerial Fellowship Committee. I was nervous, anxious even, because this is our denomination’s “deciding council” for prospective candidates for our Unitarian Universalist ministry. I was well prepared, but the butterflies were having a party inside my tummy. There was plenty of time to kill before the afternoon meeting. What to do?

Off I went to the campus of UC Berkeley, an iconic space in my coming of age history. Once there, I asked passers-by where Sproul Plaza was—the historic site where I was sure I would hear echoes of Maria Savio and Joan Baez launching the free speech movement all over again. My search was like a little red hen story. I asked person after person where I could find Sproul Plaza. Person after person had not a clue. At long last I found someone who guided me there. Once there, I walked around, gazing at ghosts and straining for traces of long-ago voices. Then I looked down. At my feet was that bronze medallion proclaiming in the power of silence an aspiration so at odds with what many of us grew up clinging to as a core tenet of this nation: *Property is sacred.*

Yet a claim had been staked that this small circular space and the air above it should never be property, that it should never be owned by anyone. And I wondered to myself if the soil that is this earth and the air that we breathe and the water that we drink and cook with and bathe in are no more ours than the earth was before we were born or will be after we die.

*This land is your land, this land is my land
From California, to the New York Island
From the redwood forest, to the Gulf Stream waters
This land was made for you and me.*

How ever those lyrics of Woody Guthrie resound for us with a call to justice, I wonder. Is any land “made for you and me?”

“Columbus sailed the ocean blue in fourteen hundred ninety-two,” I would sing out as a child, while I colored inside the lines that profiled a dashing Christopher Columbus sailing off to prove that the world is round, while jingling in his pockets the coins that held the real motivation for his voyage.

Bartolomé de las Casas, a contemporary of Columbus and a Spanish priest, transcribed the explorer's journal. "The Indians," wrote Columbus, "have large communal bell-shaped buildings, housing up to 600 people at one time.... They lack all manner of commerce, neither buying nor selling, and rely exclusively on their natural environment for maintenance. They are extremely generous with their possessions....With fifty men," he calculated, "we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want." Las Casas proceeded to document the large-scale ravage of the Arawaks and hundreds of Native American communities. This was only the beginning of what became full-scale genocide and the Trail of Tears.

While Columbus' sojourn to the "new world" has been hailed by Western Europeans and European Americans as a pivotal discovery of uncharted terrain, the Arawaks and their counterparts across central North America discovered the seeds of an emerging political state that has long vacillated between lifting and leveraging yokes of oppression.

The record of Las Casas comes to us through the pages of *A People's History of the United States* authored by the late Howard Zinn. Zinn tells the story of Columbus' arrival from the "viewpoint of the Arawaks, of the Constitution from the standpoint of the slaves, of Andrew Jackson as seen by the Cherokees....of the rise of industrialism as seen by the young women in the Lowell textile mills....the New Deal as seen by blacks in Harlem...." He presents the narrative of our nation through voices that have been muted in mainstream history.

"I eat my history day by day,

...By this earth's life, I have
its greed and innocence,
its violence, its peace."

proclaimed the poet, Wendell Berry.

What slice of history do *we* ingest? In what state of nation and world do we worship together this morning, seeking hope, relief perhaps, comfort maybe, respite even from the realities that called this congregation to join with hundreds of other Unitarian Universalist congregations and post a banner out front that reads: "Standing on the Side of Love!" You recognized that this faith, to be relevant at all, offers a community through which we're called to witness to a larger love and not just to talk about it but practice it, because it takes so much practice.

We stand on the threshold of what many in this nation call Columbus Day. Its observance is fueled by the so-called Doctrine of Discovery, whose seeds were planted over half a millennium ago in 1452, just 40 years before Christopher Columbus DIDN'T discover America. In that year, Pope Nicholas V issued a decree "that specifically sanctioned and promoted the conquest, colonization, and exploitation of non-Christian territories and peoples." Laws that for centuries have violated the dignity and sovereignty of indigenous peoples worldwide have embodied the arrogance of this decree, which became doctrine religiously and politically.

How long does it take for injustice to crumble? How long does it take for humankind to step away from fear of the "other" and the tendency to act on that fear through oppression that is overt and covert? Five years ago, in 2007, the General Assembly of the United Nations—no, not the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association (those phrases do easily run together) adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The vote was

overwhelmingly pro; yet the United States joined three other nations in voting against this Declaration. It wasn't until 2010 that the U.S. signed on.

This past June several thousand Unitarian Universalists convened in Phoenix for the first ever Justice General Assembly. “Standing on the Side of Love” was our mantra for worship, workshops, witness, and resistance to laws on the books of this nation that have led to the likes of a veritable concentration camp flooded with undocumented immigrants on the outskirts of Phoenix and other ongoing violations of the dignity of indigenous peoples of this land. At the urging of “immigrant justice partner organizations,” the Board of Trustees of our Unitarian Universalist Association and our UUA staff studied and discussed the Doctrine of Discovery.

In the months preceding this General Assembly, I recall my friend and colleague, Rev. Dr. Michael Tino, urging us all to study this doctrine and be ready to take action in Phoenix. Once there, we passed a resolution repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery “as a relic of colonialism, feudalism, and religious, cultural, and racial biases having no place in the modern day treatment of indigenous peoples.”

“As an Italian-American, I dread the second week in October,” Michael wrote in a recent Standing on the Side of Love narrative. “Each year, I hear the language that proclaims that Columbus ‘discovered’ America, and I struggle, knowing where this language comes from... I invite you to help me to honor *my* cultural heritage—with all of its complicated and messy parts—by helping me to decolonize our faith.”

From the time I was a little girl, I heard my grandmother speak proudly of our ancestors who came to this land on the Mayflower. Heroes and heroines they were—and undocumented to boot, though Grandmother didn't include that part. Like Michael, I too stand on the shoulders of colonists. More accurately, I wobble on the shoulders of colonists and need all the help I can get in decolonizing the faith I hold dear.

I invite you to close your eyes for a moment. Close your eyes and imagine:

“I am the young man who grew up on a reservation, reminded again and again that my people are no longer honored as they deserve to be honored. I struggle to finish high school, to imagine college, to honor my ancestors, to remain in this family while partaking of the riches I see out there.”

“I am the aged mother of children I brought across the border to escape the violence in my homeland. I had thought that here we would be safe, even welcomed; here we would find work, and my children would get the education that they need. I do the most menial of work for wages that barely keep us going. Yet I was arrested this morning for looking Latino, which I am, for looking like the people who were here in the Americas long before the ancestors of the officer who arrested me ever thought of coming to this country.”

“I am the woman who aspires to the ministry. By instinct I have come to this space whose ground bears the words of prophets who gathered here not so long ago and proclaimed heresies sacred to the politics of justice and the religion of inclusion.” Here I have discovered that:

“[The] soil [of this earth] and the air space extending above it
[belong ultimately to the cosmos], whose boundaries are nonexistent
and which is subject only to being itself.”

“I am a citizen of nowhere and everywhere. My name is Black Elk. The boundaries of this nation are too limiting. The force of gravity barely contains me. My soul soars, for I have ascended to

“...the highest mountain of them all, and round beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell, and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in the sacred manner the shape of all things of the spirit and the shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that make one circle, wide as daylight and starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy.”

May it be so. Amen.

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