



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Reflection on Indigenous Peoples Day

Powtawche Valerino

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301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

Halito, my name is Powtawche Valerino. I am a member of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, and our reservation is located in Philadelphia, MS. I am grateful for this opportunity to share my thoughts and hopes with you for Indigenous People's Day.

In case you didn't know, the Los Angeles and Burbank City Councils recently voted to replace Columbus Day for Indigenous People's Day. Los Angeles joins 5 other cities, and 5 states, in acknowledging and celebrating the rich cultures of Indigenous peoples everywhere. This proclamation is a small, yet monumental effort to recognize a resilient group of people, who fight the forces of imperialism and colonialism even today – such as the Dakota Access Pipeline, the thirty-meter telescope in Hawaii, and the continued issues with tribes in the Amazon rainforest, to name a few.

I will keep our ancient, and not so ancient, history brief. We are all well aware of the U.S. government's long-standing efforts to eradicate Native Americans for the acquisition of our homelands and resources. Treaties were made, and then broken. This is a common theme in U.S history.

For example, my Choctaw ancestors originally lived in the region of what is now Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, and were part of the "Five Civilized Tribes." The Five Civilized Tribes were a confederation of Native people who wanted to cooperate with the original 13 colonies, and establish mutually beneficial relationships.

However, starting in 1831 under President Andrew Jackson, the Choctaws were part of the "Trail of Tears", a policy that forcibly removed Native Americans from their homelands since they did not agree to give-up their land and resources to new European immigrants. Ironically, some descendants of those immigrants are some of the loudest voices complaining about recent immigrants to these shores today. Furthermore, you see the connection between Trump's favorite president, Andrew Jackson and himself. What we are witnessing now is not a new phenomenon.

Mississippi Choctaws did not comply; I am the descendent of those who hid in the woods or ran back to their homelands during the removal. As a result, there are two separate tribes of Choctaws in the U.S.: the Oklahoma and Mississippi bands. I am proud that my people resisted, and stayed on their homeland, although they were subjected to harassment and legal intimidation for several decades.

The policy of breaking-up Native communities continued well into the 20th century with boarding schools, legal discrimination, and assimilation policies, such as the Indian termination Law of 1953. This law called for the "immediate termination of 109 tribes by ceasing all federal aid, services, and protection. Approximately 1.4 million acres of Indian land was taken by the time the policy ended in 1970.

This law also called for the Interior Department to quickly identify other tribes who would be ready for termination in the near future, which led to the Indian Relocation Act of 1956. Native Americans were lured away from their reservations and encouraged to assimilate into mainstream society by living in cities. The policy's intention was to terminate indigenous communities and gain control of the remaining tribal

reservation resources. As a result, it so happens that Los Angeles has the second largest indigenous urban population in the United States.

My mom and her family were part of this history. As a toddler, her family relocated to Chicago to pursue jobs and a better quality of life. Instead, like many others, they found the transition challenging. Low paying employment, racial disparity, cultural shock, and other injustices made it difficult for Native Americans to succeed. Moreover, indigenous principles were incompatible in the urban “modern” setting. Individual competition, assertive opinion, and ownership, was, and still is, valued over cooperation, the ability to listen, and generosity.

Once my mom graduated from high school, she returned to the Choctaw reservation, and the rest of the family soon followed. I was raised there during my formative years. This is where I gained my native identity.

As a person who is half African American and half Native American, I have adopted the holistic approach to my identity and humanity. My personal experiences and understanding of history have made me see that all people strive for self-determination. In the end, that’s what we all want. However, how do we do so, when our principles do not align? Competition or cooperation? Individual or community? To live with nature or dominate it?

As my ancestors have demonstrated, our communities can overcome hardships without losing their identity. I am empowered knowing that my people adapted to modern times, and are rebuilding our nations. I strongly believe all of us can collectively navigate between our cultural differences and work towards common goals. This is especially important today.

For this Indigenous People’s Day, I believe we must recognize and celebrate all of our individual and cultural differences, but moreover, respect and exalt our common humanity. It is in our common humanity that we can find our shared common goals. Some of these being, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Most of you may think this is a nod to Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence, but these principles can be found in the Iroquois confederacy, and the establishment of the “Great Law of Peace” in which the framing of the U.S. constitution was influenced by. In 1988, a concurrent resolution was passed by the US Senate to acknowledge the contribution of the Iroquois Confederacy to the Development of the United States Constitution, and to reaffirm the continuing government-to-government relationship between Indian tribes and the United States established in the Constitution.” This is an example of interconnectedness between cultures and learning from each other, principles we all share, a finding of common sacred ground.

It is our interconnections to one another, and the environment, that is the paramount guiding principle of Indigenous cultures around the world and should be the guiding principle of our modern society. There’s a famous quote, widely attributed to Chief Seattle, that states, “Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect.”

Even our problems are interconnected. Many who are for saving and protecting the environment would have to be anti-war just for the mere fact that the U.S. military is one of, if not the biggest, polluters of the planet. We must recognize that our nation’s most recent domestic violence, the mass murders, the ubiquity of police brutality, and degradation of the environment is connected with the violence, degradation and callous disregard of human life we perpetuate as a nation around the world. Remember, “...Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves...”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said, "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual doom." Our national moral decay, which includes a lack of respect of our common humanity and the delicate web of life, is directly tied to our military corporate adventurism. Human life has been commodified; from the calculation of cost to equip a single soldier on the battlefield, to the so-called health insurance plans by corporations in their calculations on whether a patient lives, or dies, by offering or withholding a service.

For this Indigenous People's Day, I charge you to talk to your neighbors, listen to your community, and recognize everyone's history, contributions, and above all, our interconnectedness. Let us work together to strengthen our web. Let's lean on each other to heal. Finally, walk in the ways of Indigenous peoples – let's respect and protect the environment. As Black Elk, a Lakota medicine man stated, "The holy land is everywhere."