

## **“The Sins of the Father: Epigenetics and the First Nations”**

Sermon delivered by Marie Houck  
At the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greensboro, North Carolina  
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### **CHALICE LIGHTING**

#### Navaho Prayer

Beauty is before me, and  
Beauty is behind me,  
Above me and below me  
Hovers the beautiful.  
I am surrounded by it,  
I am immersed in it.  
In my youth, I am aware of it,  
And, in old age,  
I shall walk quietly the beautiful trail.  
In beauty it is begun.  
In beauty it is ended.

### **READINGS**

*The Dancing Boots* is a collection of linked short stories following several generations of a fictional Ojibway family in northern Minnesota. Its author, Linda Grover is a professor of American Indian Studies at the University of Minnesota - Duluth and is an enrolled member of the Bois Forte Band of Ojibway.

When I was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, how and where my relatives had been schooled was rarely mentioned and never discussed. Instead, the education of American Indians prior to my generation was a topic to be avoided, a source of secrecy and loss, with an undercurrent of shame. My uncle George told me, when I was a little girl, that he had gone away from home to go to school. This was a “different kind of school” that he didn’t like. He advised me that it wasn’t good to think much about the past, that we didn’t need anybody to feel sorry for us. I thought that he must have done something wrong, and that he must have been sent to reform school. What could he have done, I asked my mother. She told me that he didn’t do anything wrong, that in the time before I was born most Indian children were removed from their homes by the government and sent away to boarding schools. Don’t ask him about it anymore, she said; the story made him sad and would make me sad, too, if I knew it, so don’t bother him about it; just be thankful for the life I had.

*This next reading is by author Jim Northrup, an enrolled member of the Fond du Lac Band of the Lake Superior Ojibway. He writes of his experience attending an Indian Boarding School. The word “anin” in this poem just means, “hello”.*

## Ditched

A first grader  
A federal boarding school  
Pipestone  
Said anin to the  
first grown up  
Got an icy blue-eyed stare  
in return  
Got a beating from a  
second grader for crying  
about the stare  
Couldn't tell ma or dad  
Both were 300 miles away  
Couldn't write, didn't know how  
Couldn't mail, didn't know how  
Runaway, got caught  
Got an icy blue stare  
and a beating  
Got another beating  
from a second grader  
for crying about  
the blue-eyed beating  
Institutionalized  
Toughed it out  
Survived

*Finally, one of my favorite poems by well-known African American author, Alice Walker.*

for two who slipped away almost entirely:

for  
two who  
slipped away  
almost  
entirely:  
my "part" Cherokee  
great-grandmother  
Tallulah  
(Grandmama Lula)  
on my mother's side  
about whom  
only one  
agreed-upon  
thing  
is known:

her hair was so long  
she could sit on it:  
And my white (Anglo-Irish)  
great-great-grandfather  
on my father's side  
nameless  
(Walker, perhaps?)  
whose only remembered act  
is that he raped  
a child;  
my great-great-grandmother,  
who bore his son,  
my great-grandfather,  
when she was eleven.

Rest in peace.  
The meaning of your lives  
is still  
unfolding.

Rest in peace.  
In me  
the meaning of your lives  
is still  
unfolding.

Rest in peace, in me.  
The meaning of your lives  
is still  
unfolding.

Rest. In me  
the meaning of your lives  
is still  
unfolding.

Rest. In peace  
in me  
the meaning of our lives  
is still  
unfolding.

Rest.

## SERMON

I'm sure many of you are familiar with the Old Testament verses about the sins of the father. From Exodus 20:5, "I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me."

Even more frightening, from my point of view, was Deuteronomy 23:2 "A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to his tenth generation shall he not enter into the congregation of the LORD." Since my father was a bastard -- literally, having been born in a home for unwed mothers -- I had a hard time understanding how God could ban ME from heaven. My fundamentalist church assured me that Jesus' death and resurrection changed all that, but even so, those verses, seeming to contain a threat based on something one's ancestors had done, really bothered me.

It wasn't until some years after I had left that religion behind that I began to understand those verses differently. My father's mother had died, and the lunch after her funeral was held at the local VFW. For those unfamiliar with these facilities up north, this is basically a bar open to the public, with an event room that is available to VFW members for their use. After the lunch, many of Dad's relatives began to drift into the bar to start drinking. As we were leaving, my mother looked back into the bar at so many of my father's relatives well on their way to their daily drunk, and quoted that verse: "The sins of the father shall be visited upon the sons." Finally, I understood that verse not as threat, but as prophecy.

As many of you know, I am part Native American, specifically Ojibway, or Chippewa. (Actually, we call ourselves Anishinabe, but that's a different story.) Though I never lived there, I am enrolled on the Fond du Lac reservation just outside of Duluth, Minnesota. My direct ancestors never lived on the reservation; we were "given" land through the Dawes Act. The Dawes Act, also called the General Allotment Act, was passed in 1887. The plan was to "give" allotments of land to each Native instead of allowing them to hold land in common, and open any land left over to be sold to white settlers. The act had six stated goals, among them to break up tribes as a social unit, and to encourage farming and individual initiative, thus further undermining Native Culture, and to turn more land over to white settlers. Under this Act, my great grandmother and her siblings each received 80 acres. We are one of the few families that still holds the land as an allotment, which means it cannot be sold without agreement of all of her descendants, and we each have a fractional ownership in the land. I figure my share is somewhere in the neighborhood of one third of one percent.

My father was raised by his grandparents. He knew his grandmother's family -- the family that had received the allotment -- and spent time on that land while growing up. I remember visiting there as a very young child, when my great-great grandmother was still alive. It is still one of my favorite places on earth to spend

time. When Dad's grandmother was a child her mother, my great-great grandmother, was told she'd have to send all of her children away to boarding school. I'm not sure how the family managed it, but they convinced the Bureau of Indian Affairs to allow them instead to set up their own one-room school-house and train their own teachers, since the children could not attend the school for white children. Thus she was able to keep her children at home. My sister believes this may have been, at least in part, a privilege that came from being of mixed blood. My father grew up knowing his grandmother's family history, and knowing his many relatives on that side of the family.

My father knew much less about his grandfather, the man who raised him. As far as I know, he knew nothing of his grandfather's family or of his personal history, and I don't remember ever meeting any of those relatives, or even hearing their names. Once, after Dad was grown, he was walking with his grandfather when they were stopped by an older woman. His grandfather proceeded to carry on a conversation with her in Ojibway. Until then, Dad didn't even know his grandfather spoke that language. After she left, Dad asked who the woman was, and his grandfather told him it was someone he had known in boarding school. Until then, Dad also didn't know that his grandfather had been one of the victims of the Indian boarding schools. It was something his grandfather never did talk about, and he spent most of the rest of his life running away from his Native heritage. By the time I knew him, he was an old man, but by from the stories I hear, he was not a very nice man. Understanding his history helped me understand the physical violence in my own childhood, and put it into a different perspective.

My Great Grandpa St. George – the man who raised my father – was born on the White Earth reservation, and sent to a boarding school in Tower, Minnesota. His siblings were sent to different schools: the attempt to break up families went beyond removing children from their homes, it sometimes included separating siblings. At the schools, they cut off the boys braids (a symbol of strength in many nations), took away their own clothing and replaced it with European style clothing, and even changed their names, removing even that part of their identities. They were forbidden from speaking their native languages or engaging in any of their traditional rituals. The children in these schools were frequently beaten, and subjected to sexual abuse. This was a deliberate attempt at cultural genocide.

[Richard Henry Pratt](#), founder of The Carlisle Indian Industrial School, which served as the model for other Indian boarding schools, said, "A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him and save the man." This was actually an improvement over other attitudes prevalent at the time: he at least considered the Native population capable of being educated and civilized. This attitude, "kill the Indian, save the man" became the guiding philosophy of much of the US government approach to dealing with the Native population.

Of course, the attempted destruction of the people of the First Nations started way before that. In 1493, Pope Alexander the VI issued a Papal Bull which became known as the Doctrine of Discovery. The Bull stated that any land not inhabited by Christians was available to be “discovered,” claimed, and exploited by Christian rulers and declared that “the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself.” This “Doctrine of Discovery” became the basis for all European claims in the Americas and the foundation for the United States’ western expansion. It was even cited in a US Supreme Court decision in 1834, when Chief Justice John Marshall’s opinion held “that the principle of discovery gave European nations an absolute right to New World lands.”

Some of this history, the history of Natives forced off of their land, of the massacres and wars, of the sometimes deliberate spread of disease may seem like ancient history. However, the Indian schools are decidedly not. In 1973, 60,000 native children are estimated to have been attending boarding schools. However, during the late 1960’s and into the 1970’s the rise of Indian activism led to the closing of most of those schools. By 2007, only 9500 children were still enrolled.

In addition to my great grandfather, I have personally known a number of people who were forced into these schools. Jim Northrup, the man who wrote the poem “Ditched”, was born on the reservation where I am enrolled. He was only nine years older than I am. Members of my family knew him well, and I have inherited several of his books autographed to my Dad. He taught my sister how to make the ricing basket that is on the altar today. Jim was forced into the boarding school at the age of six. He later attended a high school run, he says, by the Wesleyan Methodist Tribe. He writes of the merit/demerit system in the high school he attended: Merits were given for memorizing bible verses, demerits for acting like a teenager. He says he’s pretty sure he left the school with demerits still unserved.

My mother talks of one old woman she knew up on the Nett Lake reservation who would only speak to her brother, and only spoke Ojibway. Her brother explained to Mom that when they were forced into the Indian school, he learned English relatively quickly, but his sister did not. The beatings she received when she spoke Ojibway were so severe that she simply stopped speaking all together.

The schools deliberately developed a sense of shame in being Native, and many, like my great grandfather, learned to walk away from their Native ancestry. I learned to not talk about it when I was about eight. I was in third grade, and one of our vocabulary words was “ancestor”. The teacher asked us if any of us had ancestors of whom we were proud. I stood and said I was descended from Chief Osage, an important man in local history. In fact, on older maps, the area we now call Wisconsin Point is labeled Osage Point. My teacher said, “Sit down, Marie. We’re talking about ancestors to be proud of, not Indians!” Over the next month or so, she joined the children in teasing me about being Native, and so I learned to be silent on

the matter. People who knew my family name knew I was Native, but with my fair skin it was easy to not draw attention to that fact. It would more than a decade before I began to speak again about being part Ojibway

We know much of the legacy from the violence done to the native culture. Natives are the poorest demographic group in the country. They die at higher rates than other Americans from tuberculosis, alcoholism, diabetes, vehicle crashes and suicide. In fact Native youth have the highest rate of suicide of any ethnic group, and suicide is the second-leading cause of death for Native youth ages 15 to 24. Average life expectancy is quite low compared to the average overall, while unemployment is high. The level of violence in the Native community quite high, with the level of sexual assault particularly troubling: Native Americans are 2.5 times more likely to experience sexual assault and rape than any other ethnic group in the United States. A high percentage of this violence is at the hand of people who are NOT Native.

It has been generally assumed that the roots of these problems are a combination of the extreme poverty of many Native American communities, and the history of violence aimed at us. In the early 1980's, a Lakota professor of social work, Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, coined the phrase "historical trauma" to describe "the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations." She also called this "soul wound". When my sister worked for Mending the Sacred Hoop, an organization that works in the area of domestic violence in the Native community, she and her coworkers developed a program for the abusers that was culturally specific, asking them to trace the roots of violence in their own families. My family, like many others, can easily trace the familial violence to my Great Grandfather, and the violence done to him at the hands of the white people who ran the Boarding School he was forced to attend. This tracing of the roots of violence has helped at least some to begin to heal. (This program also got them in trouble with John Ashcroft, because he objected to anything that seemed to blame past US policy for current conditions.)

So we do understand that much is transmitted through the generations by how we are raised, by the legacy left us by the treatment of our ancestors. More recently, however, we have begun to discover that there may be more going on at the cellular level to pass on specific traits. We get our DNA, our genes, from our biological parents. These genes determine things like the color of our skin, how tall we are, our innate skills, and so on. However, specifically how these genes are expressed is also determined, in part, by environmental factors – things like diet and stress, for example. Those things will turn specific genes "on" or "off" by adding things to the outside of the gene – hence the term "epigenetics", or on the outside of genetics. It was believed that all of those epigenetic markers were eliminated during the reproductive process, but it turns out that isn't entirely accurate.

Rachel Yehuda, a psychologist at the Veterans Affairs Hospital in the Bronx and a professor of psychiatry and neuroscience at Mount Sinai Hospital has determined that some epigenetic markers ARE passed on from parent to child. Thus we may not

carry the memory of something that happened to our ancestors in our brains, but we do carry the memory in our very cells. Another researcher refers to this physical transmission of the past as “embodied history”. These epigenetic markers govern things such as how our bodies react to stress at a hormonal level. So, for example, having a biological father who suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder before they were conceived makes it more likely that a person’s epigenetic markers will make it harder for them to handle stress – more likely to struggle with anxiety, less able to handle traumatic incidents in their own lives.

A great deal more research is needed, but think about that for a moment. We actually carry in our bodies the memory of what happened to our ancestors. We embody their history.

Unlike the basic DNA, these epigenetic markers can change over one’s lifetime. As more is learned, I believe it will help therapists with clients who may have inherited epigenetic markers that, for example, make it more likely that they will handle stress poorly.

For the rest of us, being aware and being gentle with each other is one step towards healing.

We can become educated about the current reality. I know most of you are aware of the Black Lives Matter movement, begun as a response to police violence in the Black community. But did you know that there is also a Native Lives Matter movement, and that Native Americans are MORE likely to die at the hands of the police than African Americans? There are fewer of us, and it doesn’t receive wide spread publicity outside of specifically Native news outlets, but it is there, and the stories are just as horrific. A Native woman died in police custody the same week that Sandra Bland died, but I’m sure most of you have not heard the name Sarah Lee Circle Bear. I have relatives who look more Native than I do who are pulled over by the police for bogus reasons with startling regularity when they drive into Minneapolis.

We can understand how our laws affect Natives. Did you know that local police have no authority over crimes committed on a reservation – and that the reservation justice system cannot prosecute non-Natives for most crimes committed on the reservation? The only authority to prosecute those crimes lies with the Federal Government, through the FBI. And, especially since nine-eleven, the FBI doesn’t have the time to deal with those things. As a result, in some areas it has been open season on the reservation, especially for women. Non-Native men have been going onto reservations to rape Native women in astounding numbers, knowing that they can do so with impunity. When an attempt was made to change that, to give more authority to the reservations judicial system, one Senator – I can’t remember which one – said we couldn’t do that, because then white people would be tried by juries that were likely to be all Native, and they obviously couldn’t be counted on to be objective! (I really wanted someone to ask him if all – or mostly – white juries could



be counted on to be objective when the defendant was a person of color, but I digress....) Things are a bit better since the passage of the Violence Against Women Act, but there is still a lot of room for improvement.

We can be aware of where and how treaty rights are still being violated. Natives are still arrested periodically for hunting and fishing in ceded territories, when the treaties they signed specifically stated that they had the right to hunt and fish in those territories. A few years back, there was a fairly well publicized case in Wisconsin involving spear fishing, and as recently as last summer there were some incidents involving ricing – harvesting wild rice – in ceded territories.

And we can know the real history of this country in all of its messy complexity, pass it on, and remember it. We say “never forget” about the World War II holocaust, and there are even days set aside to specifically mark it. Yet I have been told, far too often, that for us Native Americans, it’s time to forget what happened in the past, and just get on with living in the present and the future. After all, I’m told, that was a long time ago and we need to get over it.

The readings this morning included one from the book, The Dancing Boots, about how the history of the Boarding Schools was shrouded in secrecy and shame. When she is much older, the same character says, “I experienced through [Aunt] Shirley[’s stories] the family’s role as participants in and witnesses to a vast experiment in the breaking of a culture through the education of it’s young. ... I began to see that as Indian people our interactions with society and with each other include the specter of all that happened to those who went before us. As their schooling experiences defined too much of their lives, so that legacy continues to define much of ours. Yet without it, we disappear.”

Finally – and this may seem odd to some of you – we can keep laughing. Native humor is a special thing. You will see a few examples of it out in the foyer, and some that cracks me up may not strike you as funny. But whatever tradition it’s from, laughing keeps us all a bit healthier. In an interview towards the end of his life, Jim Northrup was asked how he could make jokes about his impending death from cancer. He said, “There is nothing so serious you can’t make a joke about it, and making a joke about it makes it easier for survivors.”

So be gentle, learn the truth, understand the present, make sure we pass the knowledge on to the next generation, and laugh often.

Amen

BENEDICTION

Ojibway prayer

Grandfather, look at our brokenness

We know that in all creation, only the human family has strayed from the Sacred Way.

We know that we are the ones who must come back together to walk in the Sacred Way

Grandfather, Sacred One, teach us love, compassion, and honor

That we may heal the earth and heal each other.