

**First Universalist Yarmouth, ME**  
**Indigenous People's Day Worship Service, Oct 11th, 2020**  
**Homily: "Discoveries," by Rev. Hillary Collins-Gilpatrick**

**Opening Words**

Good Morning, how are you? It is good to be with you on this day held by some as Columbus Day and to others as Indigenous People's Day.

No matter who you are, or where you're from,  
No matter what you've done, or who you love,  
No matter if you know the history of the land you stand upon,  
Don't know anything about the land you're on,  
Or never thought about it before,

You are welcome here and I'm glad you're here.

Good First Universalist People,  
We broadcast our service live to you this morning from our Sanctuary at 97 Main Street in Yarmouth, ME, Ancestral land of the Abenaki, Penobscot, Mi'kmaq, Passamaquoddy, and Maliseet people, who united in 1606 to form the Wabanaki Confederacy.

They are the "People of the First Light;" "The People of the Dawn Land."

This area of Maine runs between what was once called the Aucocisco and Arosaguntacook.

Translated from Abenaki Aucocisco means "Place of Herons" but later came to be understood as the "Bay of Helmets" due to the presence of Portuguese explorers along the shore. It is now known as Casco Bay.

The Arosaguntacook or "River of Rocks Refuge," was home to many subgroups of the Abenaki. We know Arosaguntacook now as the Androscoggin.<sup>1</sup>

We recognize and acknowledge that we gather today on indigenous land, taken through deception, coercion, and violence.

We acknowledge the continued displacement and oppression of Native people

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<sup>1</sup> <https://native-land.ca/>

And honor their commitments to survival, identity, and the protection of our world.<sup>2</sup>

Won't you take a moment of quiet with me now to honor these truths and honor this land.

Breathing a deep refreshing breath into your heart now,  
source of healing, love, courage, and pain.  
Take a moment to honor your life.  
Breathe in an honor the opportunities you are given every day to heal,  
to love, to be brave,  
And to come into a restorative relationship with what hurts.

First Universalist, it is truly good to be with this bright morning.  
Our Service has begun. We have much sacred work to do on this sacred land.

Our opening words are a poem by Karenne Wood, a member of the Monacan Indian Nation, who served on the Monacan Tribal Council and directed the Virginia Indian Programs at the Virginia Center for the Humanities. To begin our service today we read Karenne Wood's poem, "Prayer Bowl."

"When the moon is turned upwards like a bowl waiting to be filled  
We must fill it. We must fill it by honoring the spirits of creation  
With songs of our joy and thanks, with foods created with our own hands,  
Water for the thirsty, prayers for the people, prayers for the spirits,  
Prayers for the Creator, prayers for ourselves, and the sacred instruments  
That join us to the glory of the world, that join us to the glory of this world,  
And then to the world beyond our sleep."

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<sup>2</sup> With thanks to Rev. Florance Caplow of the UU Church of Urbana Champaign who made these words of land acknowledgement available for public use.

## Reading

Our reading is an excerpt from *An Indigenous People's History of the United States for Young People*, by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. A version of Dunbar-Ortiz's history text is also available that is not expressly for younger readers.<sup>3</sup>

“In the late fifteenth century, as European explorers sailed to unfamiliar places, their actions and beliefs were guided by the Doctrine of Discovery—the idea that European nations could claim the foreign lands they “discovered.” The Doctrine of Discovery was laid out in a series of communications from the pope, leader of the Catholic Church, who was extremely influential in European politics at the time. It asserted that Indigenous inhabitants lost their natural right to that land as soon as Europeans arrived and claimed it. People whose homelands were “discovered” were considered subjects of the Europeans and were expected to do what the “discoverers” wished. If they resisted, they were to be conquered by European military action. This enabled Columbus to claim the Taino people's Caribbean home for Spain and to kidnap and enslave the Indigenous peoples. Similarly, the Pilgrims and the Puritans, the first groups from England to settle what became the United States, believed they had a covenant with God to take the land. The Doctrine of Discovery influenced the policies of the young United States and directly affected the lives and the very existence of Native people. However, history textbooks for young people rarely invite students to question or think critically about that part of the US origin story.

“Free” land, with all its resources, was a magnet that attracted European settlers to the Americas. The word *settler* is used so frequently that most people do not recognize that it means more than just a person who settles down to live in a new place. Throughout history it has also meant a person who goes to live where, supposedly, no one has lived before. More often than not, “settlers” have gone to live somewhere that is already home to someone else. They are important to a nation—like Britain or Spain—when it plans to set up colonies in an area. Colonization is the process of taking political and economic control of a region, and colonizers are people or institutions that are part of that process: the military, business interests, people who go there to live, and sometimes representatives of religious institutions. Because of their key role in establishing and populating a colony, settlers may be called colonizers. Settlers who came to what is currently known as North America wanted land for homes, farms, and businesses that they could not have in their home countries. Settlers who used the labor of enslaved Africans wanted limitless land for growing cash crops. Under their nations' flags, those Europeans fought Native people for control of that land.

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<sup>3</sup> Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous People's History of the United States* (Beacon Press, 2019).

Even when the United States consisted of just a few states on the Eastern Seaboard, the country's founders fully intended for "America" to extend "from sea to shining sea." In fact, the first law of the new nation was created because of that demand for land. The Continental Congress wrote the Northwest Ordinance in 1787, two years before the Constitution was ratified. It allowed settlers to live in "Indian Territory" west of the Appalachian and Allegheny Mountains. Before that, the British government's Proclamation of 1763 prohibited settlement there.

In 1801 President Thomas Jefferson described the intent to expand the boundaries of the United States, saying "It is impossible not to look forward to distant times, when our rapid multiplication will...cover the whole northern, if not the southern continent, with a people speaking the same language, governed in similar forms, and by similar laws."

The idea eventually came to be called Manifest Destiny—the belief that English-speaking Americans were destined to spread their presence and their ideals across the entire continent. Manifest Destiny was the banner under which the homelands of Indigenous people would be taken."

## Sermon

Are you familiar with the painting “American Progress?”  
You’d probably know it if you saw it.

The work of art depicts “Manifest Destiny,” a toga clad woman, white as snow, floating above the hills of America. A gold star rests upon her angelic brow. She cradles a school book and a power line coiled around the bend in her right arm. As your eyes follow this wire, you see that her left hand is tenderly guiding it forward from a trail of telephone poles that stretch into the horizon behind her. There lies a port city, shining in the rosy glow of the newly risen sun, ships and chimneys and trains all chugging away.

Behold, the bright, beautiful dawn of American progress.

Following the narrative of the painting, your attention moves to the left of the frame, the west, a dark mountainous region, not yet touched by the industrious rays of the eastern sun.

Below the sky and mountains there are figures - animals, humans,  
Like our angel of progress, they too are moving east to west.

The figures from the east are riding stagecoaches, driving yoked cattle, carrying rifles and shovels, waving whips in the air.

They move toward the left of the painting, where groups of people, indigenous people, are fleeing their progress - some of these people are seated on the ground, seemingly in mourning, others are turning, axes in hand, to fight.

They move westward as well, but in a forced, mass migration. Herds of buffalo and wild horses, bear and elk, retreat with them into a shadowy wilderness.

The brave and brilliant angel of progress seems not to care.

Near her feet in the painting lay piles of bones. Skeletons of the beings who once inhabited this land.

She does not look down, or back, only forward.

When Christopher Columbus landed on the shores of a western land at the end of the fifteenth century, there were an estimated 3 million people already living there.

The Tainos, which translated means “Good People,” called their land, Haiti, or “Land of mountains.” Their culture was rich, spiritually driven, artistic, musical, and ordered by a governance system that was pacifist by nature.

Fifty years following his arrival on the shores of Haiti, a land Columbus named Hispaniola, or “the Spanish Island,” only 500 of the Taino people were still alive.<sup>4</sup>

This genocide to Columbus and his King, Ferdinand II, wasn’t a bad thing. It was right in line with God’s Plan, actually.

The Catholic Monarchs and conquistadors of the late middle ages were inspired by the apocalyptic tradition. A belief that the world as it was must end, so that another could begin in which God’s true will and glory would be revealed.

Ferdinand, Columbus, Ponce De Lyon, and the like were, of course, blessed by God and living in line with the values of this new world. It was their job to fulfill God’s will and bring on the apocalypse to the areas of the world where God’s glory had yet to be revealed.

Those who didn’t survive this revelation, well, they weren’t part of that Divine plan.

Though, Thomas Jefferson did not live in a time expressly guided by Apocalyptic notions, his statements, that Andrew shared in our reading today from “An Indigenous People’s History of the United States,” echo the exact sentiments of the Spanish Conquistadors.

“It is impossible not to look forward to distant times,” Jefferson fantasized, 250 years after the Taino people had been obliterated,” distant times when our rapid multiplication will...cover the whole continent, with a people speaking the same language, governed in similar forms, by similar laws.”

Jefferson was critiqued during his time for his very progressive religious beliefs, beliefs, I’ll argue, that echo the tenets of Unitarianism.

Detractors condemned him as an atheist, but nonetheless, his vision of a homogenous America was right in line with the Will of God that inspired the conquistadors.

One where he, and his fellow English speaking, white, Christian, capitalist brethren were undoubtedly the true “good people,” and their tireless efforts to colonize the entirety of the American continent was a good thing.

I was reintroduced to John Gast’s “American Progress,” last October at Soul Fire Farm where I was attending a daylong “Uprooting Racism” workshop.

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<sup>4</sup> Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (W. W. Norton & Company; 1st Edition 2018) p.6-7

Soul Fire Farm is a BIPOC-centered community farm committed to ending racism and injustice in the food system. Their mission is to grow and provide life-giving food to people living in food deserts, bring diverse communities together to share skills on sustainable agriculture, spiritual activism, and environmental justice, and train the next generation of activist-farmers.

Leah Penniman, the founder and co-director of Soul Fire Farm, was the keynote speaker at the Common Ground Fair two weeks ago. As the fair was completely virtual this year you can easily watch her address online - and many others - if you're curious to learn more about Soul Fire's call to liberatory action.

You also can purchase her book, *Farming While Black*, from a local or black owned bookstore.<sup>5</sup>

*Farming While Black* is a "Practical guide to liberation on the land."

It is not a text written for white people, but I find it's helpful to read books wherein I must de-center my experience and my needs, and attempt to learn and celebrate the experience and needs of others.

It's good real world practice.

Generously, I'll add, that Penniman did include a chapter on "White People Uprooting Racism," which offers practical liberatory guidance for people who look like me.

Leah Penniman's energy is fierce and ebullient, gentle and tough. She is Haitian. I don't know her personally, but I think it's safe to say she's is a good person.

In fact, I consider her one of the most important activists of this age our centuries of environmental and racial violence come to an unavoidable head.

Also, if Leah wasn't powerful enough in her own right, she is the daughter of Rev. Adele Smith-Penniman, the first black woman ordained to Unitarian Universalism.

So, as I sat in the main building at Soul Fire Farm listening to a presentation by farm leaders on the history of land ownership and use in the United States, I paid attention.

The first image they projected as they began the presentation?

Christopher Columbus' arrival on the shores of Haiti.

The next image, John Gast's "American Progress."

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.soulfirefarm.org/media/farming-while-black/>

I knew the painting, I'd seen it in American history texts in high school, but back then I think I saw Gast's painting as a relic of an unfortunate but distant past. Not a defining image of the American ethos.

In the opening presentation of the Uprooting Racism workshop, Soul Fire leaders obliterated that notion.

Leading participants along a timeline of stolen land, stolen people, stolen labor, and environmental oppression that spans from 1492 to the present day.

"American Progress" is not a relic of the American past, it's a symbol of America.

Hoping I could right the wrongs of my high school education, I projected the image of "American Progress," on the board in my Environmental Lit class a couple months after Soul Fire, and asked my students what they noticed.

Silence befell the room as the students looked at the painting –

One spoke up, "Hillary, I don't get it, is this painting saying we did something bad or did something good?"

I remember being struck by her use of the pronoun "we" instead of "they."

"Well back then it was saying we were doing something good."

She raised her eyebrows - "Wow."

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My friends, we are alive in a truly revelatory time. A moment when, white people especially, are being asked to confront a history that for a very long time has been comprised of white people doing "good" things that actually caused great, irrevocable harm.

People who look like me have been asked to confront this history for a long time, but now, for some reason, a vast number of us are finally listening to that plea.

Not to get too Biblical on you - but one could argue that we have once again found ourselves an age of apocalypse, a time when one world is ending and a new one is beginning.

It's not necessarily a bad thing, it's just, well, a lot. Much is being revealed!

What is our job - to stick with it.

To explore our history, examine it, hold it. We must recognize that what is history is not just history, it's now, and it will be carried into the future in one way or another. Wouldn't it be nice if we knew what we were carrying so we could pause and ask, is this good?

As I white person I, along with other white people, collectively, must acknowledge, honor, and grieve our history and the harm it's done.

We must see the skeletons at our feet and understand what killed the being who once lived and breathed with those bones, so we can stop the killing of others with just as much of a right to live.

We must know the land we stand upon, learn upon, fight upon, pray upon, enforce our rules upon. We must know the land we own, and ask ourselves what does it even mean to "own" land?

As a white person, I and my fellow white people must de-center ourselves, our needs, our experiences, our "good" history, and see what else is there.

What actual good has been hidden all this time that now, truly, must be revealed.

"I'm hopeful," Leah Penniman concludes in her keynote at the Common Ground Fair, smiling wide, "I'm really hopeful, because anything that humans do, we can also undo. So, let's talk about the strategies for making it right."

Penniman then describes the make-up of a transformative ecosystem of resisters, of builders, of reformers, and healers.

"We need therapy and prayer, art and story, and vigilance right now," she calls to listeners, "There is a place for all in this work and there is a place for you in helping with these solutions right now."

"But regardless of what strategy we take," she concludes, "We absolutely must be following the lead of the people most impacted by the issues. Those are the leaders, those are the folks we defer to, those are the folks we resource. Period."

"Transfer power over to these frontlines organizers, transfer resources, and transfer dignity."

And that's it." She smiles again.

"That how we'll solve a problem of injustice together."

Ok. That's it. -

Good people of First Universalist.

Won't you take a moment of quiet with me now to honor these truths and honor this land.

Breathing a deep refreshing breath into your heart now, source of healing, love, courage, and pain -

Take a moment to honor your life.

Take a breath and honor the opportunities you will given today to heal, to love, to be brave, and to come into a restorative relationship with what hurts.

First Universalist, it is truly good to be with this bright morning.

We have much sacred work to do on this sacred land.

Let's get to it.

Let it be so.