

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Who Discovered What?”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore October 11, 2009

READING

from *Lies My Teacher Told Me* by James W. Loewen

Columbus, like Christ, was so pivotal that historians use him to divide the past into epochs, making the Americas before 1492 “pre-Columbian.” American history textbooks recognize Columbus's importance by granting him an average of eight hundred words—two and a half pages including a picture and a map... Their heroic collective account goes something like this:

Born in Genoa, Italy, of humble parents, Christopher Columbus grew up to become an experienced seafarer. He sailed the Atlantic as far as Iceland and West Africa. His adventures convinced him that the world must be round. Therefore the fabled riches of the east—spices, silk, and gold—could be had by sailing west, superseding the overland route through the Middle East, which Turks had closed off to commerce.

To get funding for his enterprise, Columbus beseeched monarch after monarch in western Europe. After at first being dismissed by Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, Columbus finally got his chance when Queen Isabella decided to underwrite a modest expedition.

Columbus outfitted three pitifully small ships, the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria, and set forth from Spain. The journey was difficult. The ships sailed west into the unknown Atlantic for more than two months. The crew almost mutinied and threatened to throw Columbus overboard. Finally they reached the West Indies on October 12, 1492.

Although Columbus made three more voyages to America, he never really knew he had discovered a New World. He died in obscurity, unappreciated and penniless. Yet, without his daring, American history would have been very different, for in a sense Columbus made it all possible.

Unfortunately, almost everything in this traditional account is either wrong or unverifiable. The authors of history textbooks have taken us on a trip of their own, away from the facts of history, into the realm of myth.

SERMON "Who Discovered What?"

I never paid much attention to Columbus Day, probably because I didn't get the day off from school when I was growing up. It didn't become a federal holiday until 1970 and some states still don't observe it. Coming to Albany where it is observed with a parade and festival, as it was yesterday, and the number of county, state, and federal workers, schools and businesses who get the day off, has raised my awareness.

The story I heard about Columbus from my grade school history textbook is pretty close to what you heard in the reading this morning. I knew some of this was myth but didn't realize just how much was missing from the story until this summer.

Our family likes to listen to recorded books as we drive. On our way to Cayuga lake to stay with my parents and step siblings in August in two cabins, Philomena put into the CD Player one called, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* by James Loewen. She thought our son Andrew would enjoy it because he loves reading history, particularly history that challenges conventional interpretations.

Now I thought I knew some of what Loewen was going to tell me about Columbus, after I heard the section you did this morning, for example that Columbus wasn't the first to "discover" the Americas. In fact aboriginal peoples did that across the Bering Strait many thousands of years before. But more recently I knew the Vikings had visited Vineland some 500 years earlier. I'd heard the Irish proclaim St. Brendan might have visited three or four hundred years before that. I *hadn't* heard of the compelling evidence that the African Phoenicians probably visited Mexico around 750 Before the Common Era. Huge basalt carved heads dated to that time with realistic portraits of West African faces are pretty compelling evidence. Evidence of a continuing West African connection came from the metal used by the Arawak for spears called guanine. Guanine is the same West African name for the same alloy of copper, silver and gold used to form their spear heads.

I didn't know that the flat earth myth gained popularity through Washington Irving's creative biography of Columbus written in 1828. Even from ancient times, people could

see the round image of the earth reflected off the moon and sailors knew that the curving of the earth was the reason ships disappeared from the horizon.

Rather than an ordeal, Columbus's first voyage enjoyed beautiful, calm weather practically until the final day. There were no intimations of mutiny beyond the usual grumbling that occur when a group of men share a small space for an extended period of time.

Today, I'd like to bring your attention to Columbus' second voyage. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella were so excited about what Columbus found, they outfitted him with seventeen ships, over a thousand men, cannons, crossbows, guns, cavalry and attack dogs for that second journey. To the Arawak, the native people of Haiti, this was parallel to an H.G. Wells *War of the Worlds* invasion.

And invade they did returning in 1493 demanding food, gold, cotton and women for sex. If natives didn't comply with their demands, they cut off their ears or nose and sent them back as a warning of the Spanish capacity for terrorism. At first the Arawak passively resisted by refusing to plant crops and abandoned towns near the Spanish settlements. Finally the Arawak fought back but their arrows and spears were hopelessly outmatched by the Spanish firepower. This resistance became Columbus' excuse to make war on them. I'll spare you the first person accounts of the heart rending descriptions of the slaughter.

Initially, Columbus didn't find the gold he had promised he would find. So instead, he sent back native peoples for slavery. In 1495 he rounded up 1500 natives selecting 500 to return to Spain and 500 for the Spaniards staying on the island. 200 of the ones selected to return to Europe died on the way. Columbus wrote to Ferdinand, "In the name of the Holy Trinity, we can send from here all the slaves and brazil-wood which could be sold."

Although we don't know the exact reason Columbus sailed west, we do know economic gain was a primary motive. In 1499 Columbus did make a major gold discovery. Hundred of thousands of native peoples were pressed into service to mine that gold, of which Columbus prospered quite well, well enough to endow his heirs and pass on the title, Admiral of the Ocean Sea."

Beginning the trans-Atlantic slave trade was probably the most sinister result of Columbus's discovery, eventually sending 5,000 across the Atlantic. Other nations rushed in to follow his example.

In 1501 the Portuguese began to depopulate Labrador, transporting the now extinct Beothuk Indians to Europe and Cape Verde as slaves. After the British established beachheads on the Atlantic coast of North America, they encouraged coastal Indian tribes to capture and sell members of more distant tribes. Charleston, South Carolina, became a major port for exporting Indian slaves. The Pilgrims and the Puritans sold the survivors of the Pequot War into slavery in Bermuda in 1637. The French shipped virtually the entire Natchez nation in chains to the West Indies in 1731. (p. 55)

Loewen cites many sources to support the claim that Columbus set the standard for relations between Europeans and Indian societies, a clash that reverberates to this day. The stories of inhumanity, rape, mutilation and slaughter are enough to make someone with a strong stomach ill. Even putting Columbus in the context of his times, his lack of humanity is shocking. It certainly doesn't put me in the mood to celebrate a day that should be better described as the beginning of racism and genocide.

Much as I'd like to pin this all on Columbus, as I said, plenty of Europeans were more than willing to follow his example. European conquest of the Americas is one horror story of brutality and death after the next. And for some of us, that story gets personal.

In the May 2007 issue of the Unitarian Universalist World, the Rev. David Pettee told the story of discovering during his genealogical research his connection to slave trading. With pride he had discovered he could trace his very deep New England roots back through his mother's family to seven generations of Unitarians then Unitarian Universalists. An upgrade to his ancestor searching software opened a new door to the 1774 Rhode Island Census. That census listed a family member with four slaves in the ancestral home. This led him to suspect that another ancestor was a slave trader. He found a court record of a suit by the great great grandfather of William Ellery Channing against his ancestor, John Robinson, over non-payment of wages to his crew on a voyage from Africa to Jamaica.

I, too, enjoy genealogical research. During General Assembly this past June in Salt Lake City, I found the missing link in the Trumbore line back to Andreas Trumbauer who came across the sea from Germany at the turn of the eighteenth century. On my mother's side of the family, I've worked my way back to Sarah Ball, the sister of George

Washington's mother, Mary Ball. Both sides of my family have been here since before the American Revolution so I'm sure I've got relatives in that line who were slave holders, and maybe even slave traders.

As a Northern European white male, I find it quite difficult to deny any inherited responsibility for inhumanity committed by my lineage. When I said this to Philomena Friday morning she said, jokingly, "That's not my problem." Philomena was born in Ireland. The Catholic Moriarty family along with many other Irish have suffered under the domination of the British Crown. "Although," she hesitated, "it depends on how far back you go." Her mother was a Nesbitt, of Scottish descent. The British resettled Scots in Northern Ireland. I expect if she were to look back far enough into her family line, she might find some militant Protestant relations.

So this year, Columbus Day is reminding me of the oppression perpetrated by my ancestors, oppression I still see firmly in place in the modern world. The wealthy so called first world nations enjoy a standard of living maintained by extracting the wealth from the rest of the world and leaving our waste in their lap. We inherit an economic and militaristic system that perpetuates the inequality Columbus created as he systematically destroyed the ecosystem and culture he "discovered."

(This is pretty depressing isn't it. Aren't you glad you came this morning?)

Right now, right in this moment, you've basically got three choices. The first is to tune me out, shut down the input and think about something else. You could decide to argue with the points I'm making, defend yourself against what I'm presenting, find a defect in my argument, however small and discard it. Maybe just because I said it is enough to justify discounting it and rejecting it because you don't like or trust me. This is the path of denial. I don't want to hear what you are saying so I'm checking out. I suspect almost all of us know this choice and use it.

The second choice jumps to the other end of the spectrum. You might start to feel guilt, despair, self-hatred or hopelessness. You could decide to add to my arguments *your own* long list of the evils done by Europeans, maybe by your own ancestors, as you find your whip in the closet and begin lashing yourself. "We are all miserable sinners," you might lament, "sunken in the mire of depravity." Religious liberals have our own special way to do self-flagellation as we wring our hands looking at our destruction of the biosphere, profligate energy use, ravenous consumption, and our participation, through taxation and employment, in the institutions that further oppression.

I live in both these worlds of denial and despair. *Both* approaches to deal with encountering suffering, *poison* the spirit.

This is where the preacher of old time religion would begin to harangue you about your complete, total depravity. Only accepting Jesus as your personal savior can remove the stain of original sin and redeem you, he might challenge. As a believer that there are many good ways to live a religious life, can *not* say that this path doesn't work. From witnessing the actions of many self-proclaimed Christians, I *can* say this path to salvation doesn't seem to work perfectly.

There is a *third* choice, a middle path between denial and despair built on the three R's of recognition, relationship and response. The three R's can lead to a fourth R, reconciliation.

As I'm sure you can imagine, discovering his ancestors were involved in the slave trade hit Pettee pretty hard. His impeccable Unitarian lineage had an undeniable stain that could not be removed. How could he stand in the pulpit and proclaim freedom, knowing, *what he now knew*, about his ancestor John Robinson? A spiritual wound came into his awareness, a wound in need of healing. Pettee wrote, "My faith had taught me that only an uncensored encounter with the truth might point the way forward."

That encounter with the truth drew him into a relationship with that past. He returned to the scene of the original crime. He and his wife Mindy traveled to Ghana and visited the notorious Cape Coast Castle and likely the very room where Robinson traded rum for human lives, over two hundred years ago. His next step was to seek out living relatives of the slaves his family owned. Through his research skills and some luck he was able to find an eighty seven year old woman living in Jamaica, New York, directly related to those slaves. With uncertainty and no small amount of courage, he mailed her a letter to share what he had discovered, eventually making contact with her daughter Patricia. Pettee writes:

As Patricia and I spoke about our shared heritage, I was reminded again of what I already knew—that truth-telling and repentance can be an antidote to the abuse of power that was institutionalized in the practice of slavery. The elements of our history that are shameful and horrific must be named and remembered. We must be willing to believe that there is a way out of the cycle of despair and hopelessness that lies at the

core of this brokenness. Without the commitment to remember and be held accountable for all of our history, the apocalyptic conditions that allow for the dehumanization and genocide of other people will continue to emerge.

Whatever you do tomorrow to “celebrate” this holiday set aside for Columbus, I encourage you to recognize the ways you participate in present day systems of oppression, be willing to explore your relationship to those beings (animal, vegetable or human) on the other end of those systems, and cultivate the willingness to respond morally and ethically to what you discover.

Recognition, relationship and response are three transforming ways to reconcile a broken, troubled world.

BENEDICTION

I conclude with David Pettee's words:

... I had naively placed most of my faith in the belief that a strong personal commitment to becoming an anti-racist person was somehow enough. But the work of justice making is never an individual passion. I've discovered that if our commitments are only on an individual basis and we fail to engage our religious communities in this work, we are unlikely to change the realities of systemic racism. It is only in a diverse and multicultural relational context that reconciliation might take place...

This past year has reminded me over and over again that there is no easy path toward reconciliation but that it must surely begin with truth-telling. The only way we will succeed is if we are willing to make this journey together. Our future together depends upon it.

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